ABSTRACT: Who is one of the world’s most fascinating informers? Who interpreted divine prophetic wisdom and disseminated it, to all who sought guidance at Apollo’s most famous oracular temple? The Pythia of Delphi is that informer. For centuries, women were chosen, for varying periods of their lives, to speak for the god, to be the Pythia. Our ‘gatekeepers’, those through whom information about these extraordinary women has passed, are all men. The aim of this paper is to decode the detail contained in five texts from fifth century Before Common Era to second century Common Era, and, to consider a number of key modern interpretations of those texts. The decoding is premised on the argument that the ancients’ belief in Apollo’s magnanimity and the Pythia’s expression of that divine generosity was an empirical reality at Delphi and recognised as such throughout the Greek world. My paper will conclude by offering a more balanced and empathetic analysis of the evidence for the Pythia at Delphi. The fantastic and enduring hysterical images need to be deconstructed. When reconsidered, the evidence for this fascinating informer will reveal an ancient acknowledgement of the Pythia’s status and power. Why has it been so difficult to interpret?

The fascinating informer I want to consider in this paper is the Pythia. The Pythia was a special priestess who spoke for Apollo at Delphi, a small town some one hundred and seventy kilometres north west of Athens. Modern scholars have generally tended to regard these women merely as mediums who spoke incoherently in some sort of hallucinogenic trance. Informed ancient scholars tell us something very different. They provide us with explicit and implicit evidence of the power these women exercised as Pythia. They tell us the women were sometimes young and virginal, sometimes matronly (Diodorus of Sicily 16.26). This implies two things: one, the tenure varied; and two, a Pythia may have had children. We know each woman had to come from a good honourable family, and have little or no formal education. Each needed to be pure of mind (Plutarch, Oracles at Delphi, 405C). We also know they were ‘chosen by all the Delphians’ to keep the ancient laws of prophetic speaking (Euripides Ion, 1321). The Pythia was, therefore, a very real person, bearing a title that has its roots in the Greek word ‘to persuade’ and links with Greek mythology too complex to consider in this brief paper. For perhaps two or even three thousand years, successive Pythias spoke oracular wisdom at Delphi (Plutarch Oracles of Delphi, 394D –409D; Piccardi, 651).

All our information about these women comes to us via the minds of ancient men. Our better informed sources construct images of poised, confident women, generally well prepared for the oracular session; one notable exception will be discussed later in this paper. They present them as articulate and knowing, impatient and
assertive. We are lead to understand that the main pre-requisite for the ‘job’ was a natural ability to tune into Apollo’s wisdom on the nine days of the year when he came to his temple. They are indeed fascinating informers and deserve to be recognised as such. Price (1985) and Maurizio (1995, 1997, 2001) recognised the centrality and importance of the Pythias at Delphi. My research builds on their scholarship. While the god for whom they spoke may have lost his credentials, his chosen ones should not be similarly ignored. Their historicity needs to be recognised and examined more fully than it has been to date. This reconsideration of the evidence will be constructed within the framework of the exciting questions that energise the theme of this symposium. Five ancient gatekeepers will be consulted. They are Plutarch, second century CE, Diodorus, first century BCE, Herodotos, Aeschylus and the Codrus Painter from the fifth century BCE. Each holds a key to unlocking ancient thinking about these women. Each piece of evidence will be referred to as a text. I will conclude this paper by offering an answer to the question: was the Pythia merely a medium?

Before turning to Plutarch, I want to reconsider a modern interpretation of his work, for in juxtaposing the modern with the ancient, I am better equipped to answer two questions: one, who is informed and who is uninformed about the Pythia, and two, how does one make informed choices when information is explained so differently. In 2001 a research paper setting out new evidence for Delphi’s geological origins was published in Geology (de Boer et al 2001). Their joint geological and archaeological project beginning in 1995 had, amongst other experiments, analysed ‘spring water and mineral deposits’, around the site of the ancient sanctuary (707). It identified the prophetic vapour as an emission of light hydrocarbon gases generated by ‘a unique combination of faults, bituminous limestone, and rising ground water [which] worked together at Delphi to bring volatile hydrocarbon gases to the surface’ (710). The surface in the vicinity of the oracular consulting chamber was of particular interest to the scientists. The light hydrocarbon gases were ‘ethane, methane and ethylene’ (710). In the early years of the last century ethylene was used as an anaesthetic. It induced euphoria and at high concentrations could cause the patient to lose consciousness and even die. De Boer, Hale & Chanton concluded their paper by saying ‘our research has confirmed the validity of the ancient sources in virtually every detail, suggesting their testimony on geology is of more value than has recently been held to be the case’ (710). The electronic versions of this dynamic story ran with headlines such as ‘Faults Suggest a High Calling for Delphic Priestesses’ (Gugliotta 2002) and ‘Oracle’s high priestesses were higher than we thought’ (Smith 2002). Any attempt at seriously reporting the findings of this inter-disciplinary field work was minimal and was, therefore, counterproductive to understanding the ancient spiritual sanctuary at Delphi. The electronic press perpetuated the flaws of early twentieth century scholarship which all too often interpreted the Pythia as an irrational,
incoherent woman, a woman with no effective stake in the oracular activity. The image makes good press for the casual curious tourist to Delphi, but does nothing to further serious research.

The one crucial detail de Boer, Hale & Chanton believed they had validated had been supplied by Plutarch. During the early decades of the second century of our own Era, Plutarch wrote two dialectic essays about the Delphic Oracle in which much thought was given to the Pythia (Barrow 1967, 31). He wrote these essays while he was a Priest of Apollo at Delphi, that is Plutarch was one of the key officials running the oracular sanctuary. This makes him our most informed source on these women. Plutarch has one of his speakers refer to something that occasionally occurs within the chamber where the Pythia speaks Apollo’s prophetic wisdom. That something is ‘a delightful fragrance coming on a current of air which bears it towards the worshippers’. (Plutarch, Obsolescence of Oracles, Moralia, 5.437D) For centuries, scholars have dismissed this detail or explained it away. They have always assumed it was linked to the existence of a chasm and as even the most casual investigation of the site confirms, no chasm could possibly have run close by the consulting chamber of Apollo’s temple. No chasm, equalled no vapour. Plutarch’s ‘fact’ remained a mystery until just a few years ago when de Boer’s team confirmed his ‘testimony on geology’, even though the ancient man would probably have defined his literary conversations as a testimony on philosophy. This distinction is important. The love of wisdom is clearly articulated by the speakers in this essay as they discuss such matters as divine impetus, matter, the human soul and in particular the soul of the woman who spoke for Apollo, the soul of the Pythia,. They conclude a very a convoluted discussion by saying, ‘The fact is that we do not make the prophetic art godless or irrational when we assign to it, as its material, the soul of a human being and assign the spirit of inspiration and the exhalation as an instrument or plectrum for playing on it’ (Plutarch Obsolescence 436F).

To decode this detail succinctly I have chosen three key words: soul, plectrum, and art. The soul of the Pythia was her instrument, the plectrum, the spirit of inspiration and the exhalation. This strums her soul, and the prophetic art is performed. By using the word plectrum Plutarch allows us to consider the Pythia as a musician, to construct an image of a woman preparing herself prior to her performance; finely tuning her instrument, her soul, so that the external influences, the plectrum can ensure the performance goes ahead perfectly. Like a musician, the Pythia would know her own expectations, and that of her ‘audience’. Like a musician, she would be comfortably familiar with the performance structure and the space where the prophetic art was to be delivered. The one word, plectrum, brings to our mind a sense of the importance of the Pythia’s preparatory
time, undertaken in what would need to be a calm, conscientious and thorough atmosphere. The highest state of readiness would be achieved just before the performance began. Having mentioned exhalation, it is at this point Plutarch describes a physical characteristic of exhalation, namely its delightful fragrance. (Obsolescence 437C-D) This is the point where ancient evidence intersects with modern scientific conclusions. The gas thy argue is present in and around the consulting chamber needs no chasm. It was generated by ‘a unique combination of faults, bituminous limestone, and rising ground water [which] worked together at Delphi to bring volatile hydrocarbon gases to the surface’ (de Boer et al 2001, 710) Plutarch’s fragrance becomes the scientists’ sweet smelling, euphoric ethylene, with the capacity to kill. Plutarch’s text recounts a recent incident where a Pythia died shortly after a consultation. (Obsolescence 438A-C) Death by ethylene poisoning is the modern diagnosis. The interdisciplinary team were confident they had explained Plutarch’s mysterious fragrance. Historians can now surely take a deep breath and understand Apollo as a light hydrocarbon gas with personal characteristics of ethane, methane and ethylene! No longer do we need to think of the Pythia as anything other than a euphoric medium caught up in a belief system that we know to have been completely ill-informed! And yet, the words, ‘delightful fragrance’, need to be decoded within their philosophical context. Plutarch has considered exhalation, fragrance and death consecutively, but he does not say the fragrance or exhalation caused the Pythia’s death. His writing clearly says that the Pythia had died because she had not prepared herself to speak for Apollo. Why had she not prepared herself? The reason is very straightforward. The Pythia knew there would be no consultations that day, because, Apollo was not in his temple. This has been proven by the sanctuary’s fail-safe testing procedure. (Obsolescence 435B-D; 437A-C) But on that day, the unthinkable and most terrifying thing happened. She was forced to speak for the absent god. The needs of an overseas delegation had to be accommodated. (Obsolescence 438A) The musician analogy comes in handy again for it makes it easier for us to imagine the Pythia’s terror. Her soul was unprepared. Her plectrum, the spirit of inspiration and exhalation, was not around. She would have known dire consequences would be inevitable. To conscientiously decode first/second century thinking about the Pythia, we need to read Plutarch’s brief reference to what we regard as a geological feature alongside his lengthy discussion of the power of a prepared

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1 Plutarch makes no mention of purification bathing and fasting as Iamblichus was to mention two centuries later, in his comments on the Pythia at Didyma. Iamblichus, de Myst. 3.11. H.W. Parke in The Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor (1985, 210) comments: ‘The only description of the functioning of the oracles at Didyma is found in Iamblichus writing about the end of the third century AD.’ Didyma was still operational but Iamblichus’ information came from ‘literary sources now lost.’ ‘Iamblichus was writing a controversial defence of ritual magic directed against his teacher, Porphyry and assumed the literary disguise of an Egyptian priest. (‘Reply of Abammon to Porphyry’s Letter to Anebo’ – commonly called the De Mysteriis). See also R. Joseph Hoffman’s: Porphyry’s Against the Christians: The Literary Remains, New York, 1994 and Porphyry the Phoenician Isagoge, trans, Introduction and Notes by Edward W. Warren, Ontario, 1975.
When we ask the question who is informed, and who is uninformed, we can answer by saying both, each according to contemporary perspectives and knowledge. We don’t have to choose. We have to recognise the authenticity of different approaches to reality. Historians regularly come face to face with realities and rationality structured very differently from those that explain our world. The evidence for Delphi’s central performer, who rendered the prophetic art both divine and rational, deserves a more nuanced interpretation.

A nuanced interpretation of our next text is difficult for many reasons. Diodorus, our second ancient gatekeeper, wrote a long history of the world in the first century BCE. This Greek writer from Sicily was not an ‘eye-witness’ source like Plutarch. He gathered his information about Delphi and its special woman from an ancient source, one he does not name but thought to have been the fourth century historian Ephorus, whose work only survives derivatively. (Sacks 1990; Parker 2004, 29-50,) Diodorus (16.26) is therefore our most ancient source of information about a chasm at Delphi that emits an intoxicating vapour. The story itself is intoxicating for we have a description of goats, their herders and others leaping ecstatically to their death once they breathe in the vapour, but not before the human casualties speak prophetically. To counteract the loss of life, the Delphians devised a tall three-legged stool, a tripod. They then chose one of their own young women and once she sat on the tripod, presumably somewhere near the inspiring chasm, she would be protected from the noxious vapours. Her words could be prophetic and her life spared. It all sounds fanciful and yet the image of the chasm has endured. His ‘testimony on geology’ has been the subject of much scientific research throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century and interestingly Piccardi (2000) dates the formation of the chasm to the fourth century, the century when Ephorus was writing his world history! The mephitic chasm, was, I would argue, in the lower reaches of the Kastalian gorge, well away from the oracular temple, while the hydrocarbon gases seem to have seeped insidiously close to the consulting chamber. The ancient testimonies on geology and indeed their modern counterparts, are confusing and do not help us understand the real women who spoke in Apollo’s temple. The one thing we can say with certainty from the information provided by Diodorus is that people in the ancient world held on to a fascination with Delphi and its special women. Theirs was a story was worth re-telling when compiling a history of the world. Diodorus, reveals something no other gatekeeper does. He tells us why matrons of Delphi took the place of young virginal women. The reason has a modern resonance. It revolves around rape. As the result of the violation of a young Pythia by an unrestrained consultant, the selection criteria for the position changed. Some sense of continuity was maintained however, for the old women continued to dress as maidens (Diodorus 16.26.6). This detail, brief though it is, does bring the Pythia as a woman into sharper focus and encourages scholars to consider the women’s purity, sexuality, age, the protection she expected and didn’t receive. We are left wondering about the sanctity of the god’s medium,
about the proximity of Pythia to consultant. Was he entranced by her voice alone, or could he see her? This ancient gatekeeper informs and obfuscates. A nuanced interpretation of his sub-text is difficult, but exciting to pursue.

Our third ancient ‘gatekeeper’ is Herodotos, the fifth century writer often referred to the ‘father of history’ (Hughes-Warrington 2000, 156-164; Romm 1998, 19-21; Waters 1985; Momigliano 1966). Throughout his Histories, he regularly tells his audience that he heard this or that story from the Delphians and refers to places at the site where international gifts could still be seen. He also tells his audience, one particularly important detail about himself - he believes oracles have the ability to impart truth (Herodotos 8.77). We, his modern audience are therefore, empowered to consider that when he writes about the Pythia, he does so from his personal belief in the efficacy of oracular system. We may say, it influences his research and his findings. He is also influenced by something else. He places his trust in his own knowledge. In an oral society where information is exchanged by word of mouth, one’s knowledge is primary source knowledge (Herodotos 1.5). We need to give it more weight. In a literate society, the written word is given primacy. One can follow a paper trail back to the original source of knowledge. Professional reputations depend on accuracy. Herodotos links his accuracy to his personally acquired knowledge. When his informants on Delphi and its oracle are Delphians, authenticity is assured. I do not agree with Fehling’s argument that Herodotos’ source citations are a literary device (Fehling 1989, 9-11, 87, 118, 126).

I want to briefly consider one oracular consultation from the late sixth century, just three generations before Herodotos’ own time (Herodotos 5.48).² Herodotos tells his audience, and we need to acknowledge that he first delivered his research orally, the Delphians told him about an incident when the Pythia refused to reply to a delegation from the King of Lydia (Herodotos 1.19f). The men had come seeking divine information about their king’s ill health. Herodotos, the reporter, surely cannot afford to get the details wrong. Memory in an oral culture is akin to an archival record. In a matter of fact manner, he recounts the Pythia’s outrageous behaviour. It seems outrageous, even at this distance, because she refused the request of a royal delegation to facilitate divine wisdom about their king’s ill health. The implicit evidence in this text is that the Pythia was secure and confident of her position. She could exercise her personal agency to commune with Apollo as she thought fit. There is no mention of Apollo in this story. The focus is on the Pythia herself. It is an extraordinary piece of

² Translator A. de Selincourt notes here that ‘Cleomenes’ reign was a brief one’. The translation by de Selincourt adds in a footnote: ‘Actually he reigned c520 to 490 B.C. Herodotos has been misled by Spartan informants hostile to Cleomenes.’ It is doubtful whether Herodotos would have sourced details of this oracular performance from the royal Spartan archival system administered by the king and a group of officials known as the ΠΗΓΗΟΥΣ. (6.57)
information. Herodotos’ failure to comment on her refusal speaks volumes. This woman had power. This woman could deny divine guidance to a king who had been ill for a long time. The power she derived from her role as Pythia was known around the Greek world. She knew, it went without saying, that Apollo had informed her the king had committed a sacred violation. Therefore, she blocked the provision of divine guidance. If Herodotos found the story about her assertive behaviour unusual, he does not say so. The evidence from silence tells us two things; one, her behaviour was not unusual, so not worth talking about, and two the Pythia had a power to refuse mortal kings. The The implicit evidence also tells us how people from fifth century were thinking about the woman at Delphi. Today, we might say that the Pythia was behaving within the expected parameters of her ‘job’. Central to this story is the Pythia. This unnamed woman is linked in history to the Lydian king Alyattes.

Contemporary with Herodotos was the playwright Aeschylus. In the early years of the fifth century, Aeschylus wrote a trilogy. His second play, Eumenides, meaning gracious goddesses, opens in front of Apollo’s theatrically re-created temple at Delphi. The ‘Pythia’ gives the opening address. It takes the form of a prayer in honour of her predecessors, starting with the first prophetess Gaia, or Earth, recognizing Earth’s daughter Themis and so on. The image is of an articulate, proud, knowledgeable woman. The image is similar to one he has portrayed in his first play, Agamemnon. King Agamemnon, victorious in Troy, has returned to Greece with his captive Trojan princess, Cassandra. Cassandra has long been regarded by scholars as a ‘dramatic representation of the Pythia in ecstasy’ (Parke & Wormell 1956, 2:xxxv). Aeschylus draws a parallel between Cassandra’s speech and the speech in which present day oracles are delivered at Delphi. So yes, she is a dramatic representation of the Pythia, but I would argue, not in a state of ecstasy. States of ecstasy encourage ideas of frenzied behaviour and contrary to much scholarship, I do not see Cassandra portrayed in a frenzied manner. Twice the playwright has his characters say her speech is clear; she knows the speech of Greece well (Aeschylus Agamemnon, 1252, 1254).

She speaks so clearly even ‘a new born-baby hearing [her words] could understand’ (Agamemnon, 1163). Ideas of ecstasy, frenzy owe their origin, I believe, to Aeschylus comparison of Cassandra with a nightingale (Agamemnon, 1140f). Nightingales have a mournful cry. Cassandra was mournful. Her voice must have been mournful. She was a captive. She had lost everything. As a discredited prophetess of Apollo, she could see her impending death and the murder of the king by his insanely jealous wife. Her soul would be in turmoil. It is the inner turmoil, I suggest, Aeschylus is re-presenting, a turmoil he himself most probably experienced years before when fighting against the Persians who had invaded his country. The very real prospect of becoming one of the enslaved, the vanquished, I believe, stayed with him for life and influenced his writing. His gravestone informed all he had survived the victorious Battle of Marathon against Persian invaders. (‘Aeschylus Vita’, 11) He and the
older members of his audience had not become slaves. His Athenian audience, I argue, would have recognised the desperate plight of enslaved Cassandra. They would have empathised with this mournful woman whose life was about to end, yet still she maintained her ability to speak articulately and knowingly. Aeschylus compares her with the Pythia. It is a powerful comparison between a woman from the past and a contemporary woman. The playwright expects his audience to learn from the comparison. Historians need to, too.\footnote{Lisa Maurizio’s (1995, 1997, 2001) scholarship on the value of words in this play has greatly influenced my own examination and the whole of my research.}

With images of these fascinating women in our minds I turn to our last text and most beautiful visual image of the Pythia during a consultation. Painted by a man we know only as the Codrus painter, his technique of red-figuring dates his work to the last quarter of the 5\textsuperscript{th} century. This gatekeeper is transferring very mixed information. The people on this kylix, a symposium drinking cup, belong to a time ancient even to him. With a painted inscription, not visible here, he identifies the woman as Themis, Gaia’s goddess daughter and the man as King Aegeus, the first king of Athens but he paints them in a fifth century setting (Connelly 2007, 76). Themis pre-dated Apollo at Delphi. The temple was built by Apollo after the time of this consultation (Sargent 1973, vii).

The Codrus painter adds attributes that belong to Apollo, for example, the laurel branch Themis holds in her right hand and the tripod on which she sits. This mixed time information is however, exciting, because it provides us with evidence for fifth century thinking about the Pythia. Themis/Pythia, the goddess blends with the woman. The oracular consultation here is peaceful, meditative. The Pythia is portrayed as well prepared. There is a poignant expectancy about this image with a king waiting to be informed about his childless state. The prophetess and the consultant are alone in the chamber. This detail is confirmed by many consultations recorded in our literary texts (Herodotos 1:47-48). The clear inference, the unspoken text, tells us that the consultant expects to understand the Pythia. This reading of the evidence has been lost on too many readers of the ancient texts.

I should like to conclude this paper by quoting the most dynamic question asked in Delphic scholarship. It is purposefully polemic and speaks loudest to those who continue to ignore the text between the lines. The question is this: ‘Why was it that the sane, rational Greeks went to hear the rantings of an old woman up in the hills of central Greece?’ (Price 1985, 131). By reading the evidence holistically, we can answer this question. The sane, rational Greeks made the difficult trek to Delphi to hear a sane rational woman speak for a god they knew wanted to provide them with his prophetic wisdom. It did not matter how she accessed that wisdom. What mattered – she did speak Apollo’s knowledge about the future, and she did speak clearly. The message might be...
ambiguous, or it might be straightforward. Interpretation was the human component of the process, a process begun within the sacred chamber of the god’s purpose built temple. The sane rational Greeks may or may not have expected to see her, but they certainly expected to hear her voice (Plutarch Oracles, 397C). They understood she was central to the performance of the prophetic art. There was nothing insane or irrational about it. If, in fact, they thought about the Pythia as Themis, they may well have thought about the Pythia as the woman who articulated law, order and justice, for this is the meaning of the feminine Greek word themis!

When the evidence for the Pythia is read differently, the special women of Delphi come into sharper focus. Our five gatekeepers have allowed us to see them as they understood them to be – important women of Delphi who knew, when it was appropriate, how to speak as a medium. None of these texts implies the Pythia was merely a medium.

REFERENCES

ANCIENT SOURCES


MODERN SOURCES


