



Stu-nick-o-sucks, Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe, by George Catlin, 1832, oil on canvas, 740 x 610mm. © Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs Joseph Harrison Jr.

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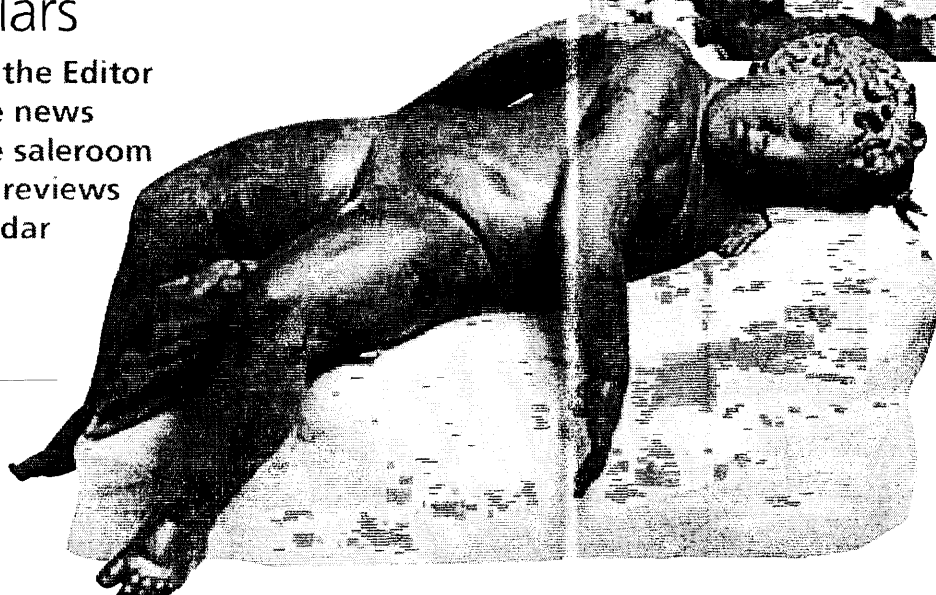
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Consulting the *Oracle*

The ancient Greeks often visited a prophetess to discover what the future held; **Richard Stoneman** goes back in time to Delphi and some of the other shrines to find out more

For more than 1,000 years, the peoples of ancient Greece consulted oracles for guidance. In political decisions or in the quandaries of daily life, they turned to the gods (usually Apollo) and asked for advice in words. The root meaning of 'oracle' is 'a thing spoken', and by extension it is applied to the shrine where the utterance is produced – a Greek oracle is not a person. The pilgrimages to Delphi or Didyma, where questions of



political moment received responses in verse from an inspired prophetess, are the best-known cases; but there were hundreds of oracles across the Greek world to which private people turned for advice on merely personal questions. At Dodona in northern Greece, many of the questions have survived, inscribed on strips of lead, and they include such trivia (from our perspective) as 'Did Thopion steal the silver?' and 'Would I do better... if I took a wife?' Unfortunately, the

1. Consulting the Oracle by John William Waterhouse, 1884. The artist explained that The Oracle, or Teraph, was a mummified human head, cured with spices and fixed to the wall. Lamps were lit before it, and rites performed until the diviners thought they heard a low voice coming from the head predicting events.

answers have not survived, but the form of the questions shows that they must have received a yes-or-no answer; and that is not surprising, since we know that oracular pronouncements were obtained by a lot of people at this shrine (and at many others).

The simplicity of the expected answers is revealing about the nature of ancient oracles. The popular picture of a raving prophetess uttering mystical gibberish is very far from the norm. The mythology

of Delphi told that the oracular function had been discovered by a goatherd who observed the strange behaviour of his goats when they neared subterranean gases escaping from a certain cleft in the rock. So, the story went, they tried the fumes on a local girl and found her hallucinatory utterances could be interpreted as messages from the gods. The practice became institutionalised, though the people soon returned to using an older woman as they found that younger, prettier



ones attracted the wrong sort of clientele. The story has been dismissed as fantasy but, in recent years, geologists have identified a fault line in the rocks at Delphi that could, in the past, have allowed the emission of hallucinatory gases; so the Pythia (the prophetess of Apollo) may have been in a trance after all.

The story is puzzling, as all the stories we know about the historical interventions of the Delphic oracle depict a rational functionary who uttered riddling pronouncements in competent hexameter verses. It will not do to say that her ravings were composed into neat forms by assistant priests at the shrine, since all sources speak as if the Pythia spoke the verses directly; furthermore, she was sometimes susceptible to bribery (herself, not her colleagues), and when Alexander the Great was refused an oracle because he visited on a 'closed' day, his reaction was to fling the woman to the ground, whereupon she gasped, 'Young man, no one can resist you!' – which gave him the pronouncement he wanted.

We shall never know just what took place in the shrine at Delphi. A veil of religious silence was drawn over the precise operation of all such shrines. An inscription from the oracular shrine at Koropi in Thessaly gives very full details about the mode of consultation: you had to wear white clothes, form an orderly queue, behave in a seemingly manner, and hand in your petition slip in turn to the officiant, who would place all the slips in an urn which he then sealed and put in the shrine overnight. 'And in the morning, when the god has given his answer...' the inscription continues, skipping over just what we should most like to know, the urn was unsealed and the petitions returned with accompanying answers.

But Delphi was the only oracle that relied on ecstatic trances. At Didyma, the shrine of Apollo associated with the Ionian city of Miletus, the priestess purified herself in an unspecified manner and then sought inspiration, which is not to be confused with ecstatic trance or hallucination, since she too was capable of immediately composing answers in verse. Something similar seems to have happened at Claros, north of Miletus, where the consultant was led, via a winding passage, into an underground chamber below the temple to hear the (male) priest pronounce his prophecy. Today



2. The Oracle Tomb at Olympos in Lycia. The lefthand block in the foreground is inscribed with 24 pieces of wise advice, one for each letter of the Greek alphabet.

3. View of the remains of the oracular temple of Zeus at Dodona, northern Greece. The trees are supposedly descendants of the sacred oak.

4. The 'theological' oracle inscribed on a panel outside the city gate facing the sunrise at Oinoanda, Lycia.

the extensive remains of the oracular temple at Claros enable us to envisage this spooky progress into an ever-darker tunnel, ending up directly under the feet of the immense marble cult statue of the god (some portions remain, indicating that the entire statue was over 20 feet high) to hear the riddling response. Germanicus, heir apparent of the Emperor Augustus, visited the shrine in AD 19: as Tacitus describes it, 'after descending into a cave and drinking a draught from a secret spring, the man, who is commonly ignorant of letters and of poetry, utters a response in verse answering to the thoughts conceived in the mind of any enquirer. It was said that he prophesied to Germanicus, in riddles as oracles usually do, an early doom'.

A century later, Claros was making a reputation for itself, not only among the Roman elite but also in the neighbouring cities of Asia

Minor. A number of them consulted Claros about the epidemic that afflicted Asia Minor in the 140s, and usually received the advice to set up an expensive gold statue of Apollo in the town in question.

Such oracles, though orotund, were not obscure; but a sceptical writer a couple of decades earlier, Oenomaus of Gadara, recorded his indignation at being fobbed off with unhelpful verses such as, 'In the land of Trachis lies the fair garden of Heracles, containing all things in bloom for all to pick on every day, and yet they are not diminished, but with rain continually their weight is replenished.' Furthermore, he discovered that other consultants of the oracle were receiving exactly the same replies as he was!

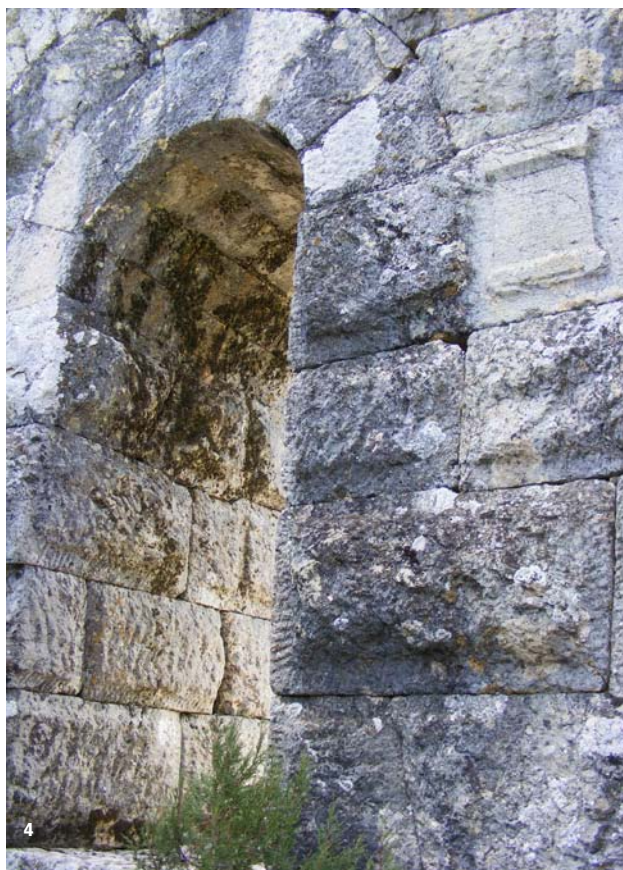
In the 3rd century Claros changed tack again and began to issue solemn theological pronouncements in response to the rising threat of Christianity. Someone called



Theophilus asked Apollo whether he or another was really God, and received the tolerant reply, 'There exists, far above the supra-celestial envelope, a limitless fire, always in movement, Eternity without limits... Self-born, self-taught, unmothered, unaffected, unnameable by any word, dwelling in fire, that is God.' Remarkably, the last few lines of this long poem were inscribed as a kind of creed on the outer wall of the city of Oenoanda in Lycia, where they could inspire a worshipper every morning as he faced the rising sun.

But such grand pronouncements were not the most common form of oracle in the Greek world. At Dodona, as has been mentioned before, lots were drawn from an urn. An anecdote related by the geographer Strabo tells how one consultation was ruined when the urns were upset by the King of Molossia's pet monkey: so perhaps there were two urns, from which the priests took respectively the question slips and, say, black and white beans for the two different answers.

In the 2nd century AD dice oracles became extremely popular in southern Asia Minor. You can still visit a tomb at the coastal city of Olympos near Antalya, where one of the pillars is inscribed with 24 lines of verse, one beginning with each



5. The interior of the temple of Apollo at Didyma, Ionia. The small sunken building in the foreground is the *adyton*, where the priestess gave oracles to petitioners.



letter of the Greek alphabet. When I take visitors there I invite them to choose a letter (perhaps their own initial) and think of a question. The answers take the form 'You will carry off everything successfully; the god says so'; 'Violence is weak if it is not employed in accordance with the laws'; 'It is hard to fight against waves; wait a while'; 'If you work half-heartedly you will reproach the gods later'; 'It is not beneficial to harvest unripe fruit'. It is surprising how often my companions say that the answer gives an excellent response to their secret question.

These answers may seem to be no different from fortune cookies drawn from a bran tub. But most of the inscribed dice oracles were presided over by a statue of Hermes, messenger of the gods, who explicitly is there to convey the words of the oracular god Apollo; and they were located in town centres, not tombs. They offered the chance of a quick answer to some pressing question without having to go through the elaborate rituals of purification and sacrifice demanded by the major shrines: a visit to the cashpoint machine rather than an interview with the bank manager.

A particularly popular form of oracular consultation was to seek a dream in the shrine of a healing god, Asclepius or Sarapis. The major shrines of Asclepius in Asia Minor, at Pergamon or at Aegae, became something between a sanatorium

and a research institute; but scholars have counted over 900 shrines of Asclepius across the Classical world, and those of Serapis became nearly as common. In a dream, the god would appear to the consultant and enjoin some perhaps bizarre activity: the orator Aelius Aristides was once told to scrub his teeth with the ground-up tooth of a lion, and inscriptions from Epidaurus record cases when the god, in a dream, performed a surgical operation on the patient, who woke up miraculously cured.

The use of oracles came to an abrupt end when the Christian emperor Theodosius abolished all forms of pagan observance in AD 395. For a century before that, Christian philosophers had been debating whether oracles were the work of fraudulent priests or of genuine, but evil, 'demons'. Eusebius, the biographer of the Emperor Constantine, marshalled all the resources of earlier writers to construct his argument that the power of the old gods had been destroyed and replaced by the new revelation of Christ; but he also exulted that the emperor's torturers had forced the priests to reveal the 'tricks', such as speaking tubes by which they produced the god's responses. Bishop Hippolytus claimed that there were even techniques that would induce a sheep to cut its own throat. The debate continued in the 17th century when Anton van Dale wrote his *De oraculis veterum ethnicorum*, published in Amsterdam, in 1675 and 1700, and in Bernard de Fontenelle's *Histoire des oracles*, published in Paris in 1687.

What is abundantly clear is that, even if the temples and the oracles were closed, the need for life advice did not come to an end. The anxious now took their questions to the shrines of saints (and, later, to Muslim holy men), and the tomb of a doctor in 18th-century Naples was a regular place of pilgrimage for the sick.

Some of you will recall that, in 2010, a German octopus called Paul was found to be unusually successful at predicting the results of football. The gods may be dead (and so, alas, is the octopus), but many still find them indispensable. ■

The Ancient Oracles: Making the Gods Speak by Richard Stoneman is published in hardback by Yale University Press at £25.