

# More Questions than Answers

Delphi, Michael Scott suggests, is still as oracular as ever

The first time you visit the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, 600m above sea level, clinging to the Parmassian mountains in the middle of mainland Greece, you cannot help but be surprised by the ancients' choice of location. Dramatic—yes. Other-worldly—yes. Difficult to get to—definitely. Perilous—at the constant rock falls (the latest just a year and a bit ago) from the overhanging sheer cliff face which soars another 400m above Delphi's remains testify—most certainly. And yet, habitation has been recorded on this spot from the Mycenaean period, and has been confirmed by the most recent excavations not to have died out as previously thought in the Greek 'Dark Age' of the 11th-9th centuries BC, but to have continued for all but perhaps a few decades, right through into the 8th century—the time of the rise of the polis—and on into the archaic, classical, Hellenistic and Roman periods until the abandonment of the site in the early 7th century AD. And even then the site was not desolate, for the ancient sanctuary was slowly incorporated into, and covered over by, the village of Crisa, which remained, its homes resting precariously on the mountain side. Then in the 15th century came the first explorers like the Italian merchant Cyriac of Ancona looking for ancient Delphi. Only in 1892 was the village finally removed, its inhabitants transferred to the site of the modern town of Delphi, and the ancient site brought back into the light (fig. 1).

How to explain this choice of location those centuries ago? Well, it turns out that this was a question the ancient Greeks were also keen to explain. A quick look at the ancient literary sources will give you some (varied) answers. In the second part of the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, written sometime in the late 7th-6th centuries BC, Apollo set off from his birthplace Delos to found

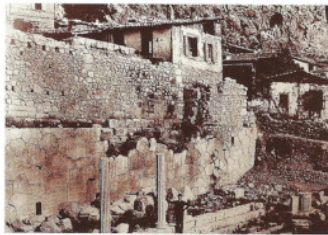


Fig. 1 Early excavations at Delphi © French school in Athens

an oracular sanctuary. He eventually settled on Delphi precisely because it was peaceful and out of the way (once he had killed a nasty serpent monster that was terrorising the neighbourhood). He tricked a boatload of Cretan sailors into coming to Delphi and made them his first priests. And when the Cretans queried how they would survive in this barren area, Apollo settled their nerves by foretelling that generations of people would make their way to Delphi and offer it riches. But just a century or so later, in the tragedian Aeschylus's *Orestia*, we find a slightly different story: the oracle at Delphi had a much longer history, going back to the days of the pre-Olympian gods, when it was the oracle of the earth goddess, Gaia. Gaia handed it to Themis, Themis to Phoebae and Phoebae to Apollo. And later in the same century, Euripides in *Iphigenia in Tauris* offered yet another story. Apollo forcibly stole the sanctuary from Gaia, having defeated in battle her serpent, Pytho, an act for which, other sources claimed, he had to offer atonement far from Delphi at Tempe in Thessaly.

By the 5th century then, there were already multiple ways of understanding how and why Delphi came to be the oracular sanctuary of Apollo, and, over the course of the ancient world, many more different stories came to circulate about the origins of the place.

And while archaeological investigation, ongoing now for more than a century, has helped us to understand the development of early Delphi, the question remains whether the site was originally only habitation—which later became a sanctuary—or place of cult activity from its very origin; there is too the all-important issue of when the oracle began. These are all still hotly debated matters over which every individual has to make up his or her own mind. But of one thing we can be increasingly certain. Delphi was not born as a place of great international importance, mirroring the role it was to come to play in the archaic and classical world. Rather, its ascent was a slow journey dependent on a myriad of factors, which slowly saw it incorporated into the worlds of different key individuals, city states and religious associations at the very time in which all these groups were struggling to address a whole new range of political and social problems: problems which arose as the Greek world metamorphosed during the 8th and 7th centuries BC and to which the apparatus of an oracle of Apollo—a direct line to the counsel of the gods—provided the ideal solution.

I have been studying the sanctuary at Delphi since my PhD days. In that time, I have come to have incredible respect not only for the generation of scholars who worked on the site of Delphi at the time of its initial excavation 1892-1902, but also for all those who gave their lives to the site in the decades before and after that—sometimes quite literally: the epigraphist Carl Müller died of sunstroke in 1840 while reading inscriptions. But I have also come to have equal respect for the way in which Delphi herself

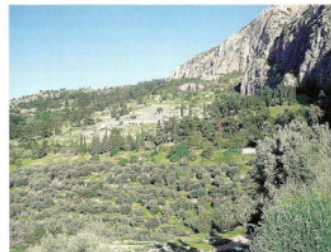
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# The Spartan Hammer and Sickle

From mediaeval Europe to the USA's fears about Russia, you cannot escape ancient Sparta, says Stephen Hodkinson

Classicists are long familiar with Sparta's major role in ancient writings: in Tyrtaeus and Alcman, in the histories of Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon, in Plato and Aristotle, and in the biographies of Plutarch—to name but the most important. Since François Ollier's 1933 study, *Le Mirage Spartiate*, the phrase 'the Spartan mirage' has encapsulated Sparta's hold over ancient imaginations, exemplified by the diverse utopian and dystopian images propagated by Greek and Roman admirers and critics.



In 1969 Elizabeth Rawson's pioneering book, *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought*, demonstrated that these ancient mirages have been matched by equally powerful and contrasting mirages in post-classical times, tracing Sparta's impact on European thinking over some 27 centuries from the 7th century BC to the mid-20th century AD. Rawson modestly introduced her magisterial survey by hoping that other scholars would improve on her 'first sketch'. In recent years her wish has been fulfilled as Sparta's post-classical reception has received increasing attention by both classicists and specialists in modern intellectual history. The emerging story is even more complex and fascinating than Rawson could have imagined.

In brief, from the 12th to the 16th centuries AD Sparta was typically represented as a model of political excellence: her lawgiver Lycurgus was portrayed as an exemplum for mediaeval monarchs; her aristocratic polity as a prototype, along with Rome, for Renaissance city states (fig. 1).

As a result, we are beginning to understand the many ironies of Delphi's long life, my favourite of which is that, at the entrance to the temple, supposedly, were inscribed a series of philosophical maxims, one of which was 'Nothing in excess'. And yet, surrounding the temple, glittering on the hillside, in gold, ivory, silver, bronze, iron and marble were monumental dedications offered by most of the major players in the ancient world, which screamed excess! As a result also, we are also beginning to be able to understand Delphi's value for the modern world. Often it has been claimed as a place of ancient international unity, even a prototype of the European Union. But perhaps its value is much more than simply as a shining, utopian ideal. Delphi shows us the many facets of human nature it is, and always has been, a 'theatre' for human interaction. Looking at that theatre today—understanding the ways in which the ancient world acted within it—offers us something of a mirror with which to compare and contrast how we have changed and how we haven't. It shows us to ourselves—warts and all—and in so doing, I would argue, provides not a distant ideal, but a reassuring reflection of where we stand today.

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Fig. 1 Lycurgus demonstrates his superiority

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