Dr Michael Scott

With the Olympics nearly here, we talk to one of the world's foremost authorities on Ancient Greek culture about the way of life, the gods and Delphi's famous oracle

How It Works: What drives your fascination of this period of history, and Delphi specifically?

Dr Michael Scott: I'm currently writing a book about the entire history of Delphi and the reason I wanted to write it is that Delphi is so often solely about the oracle, when in fact there was so much else happening. There were the Pythian Games that were on a par with the Olympics, the monumental dedications in the sanctuary, the worship of many gods aside from Apollo, and a whole host of other roles.

The other reason though is that most coverage tends to focus on the classical period, roughly from 500 to 300 centuries BCE. But this is a city lived with a population of about 1,000 citizens running a tiny sanctuary and it manages, by hook or by crook, to influence a huge number of potentates from the 7th century BCE right the way through to the Roman emperors (including Nero and Hadrian in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE) and even on into the 4th century. Indeed, the site is not wholly abandoned until the Slavic invasions of Greece in the 7th century. I think it's a most extraordinary success story that deserves to be told in full.

HIW: What were the origins of the Sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi?

MS: The traditional story was that there was a settlement at Delphi stretching way back into the Mycenaean period – so we're talking from the 1400s BCE, but that settlement died out and then there's a gap[between that and the]arrival of the oracle at Delphi. One of the biggest advances in our understanding of the archaeology of the area in recent years has been to [effectively fill in] that gap.

We can now show this site is evolving as a place of habitation all the way from the earliest times of Greek history through to the present day. It's a place that's lived – and what is almost impossible to get any sense of – is when exactly a religious sanctuary starts to be recognised here.

What we can say though is that, by the 8th century BCE, there is clearly some form of oracle building a reputation that spreads far from Delphi into the wider Greek world. By the end of the 7th century BCE this oracle, stuck up in the middle of nowhere in the Parnassian Mountains, is being consulted on some of the major questions that will affect the future for cities from all round the Mediterranean. And that is all happening, it would seem, before the sanctuary space itself has any kind of form or architectural elaboration.

So the sanctuary as it stands today looks nothing like it did in the 6th century BCE – when it was much less elaborate. And by then, the oracle has been going [strong] for at least 100 years. We have to imagine that you've got this famous oracle that people are coming to from far and wide to ask big questions, [only to find] no grand sanctuary; we don't even know (at least according to the archaeological evidence) where the oracle was practising from at this time.

This puzzled even the Greeks. A lot of the stories that are recorded in the 5th and the post-Apollo was pottering around the Greek landscape and eventually lands on Delphi as a nice spot to set up [camp] and then grabs passing Cretan sailors and drags them off Crete/sea to make them the first priests of the Temple of Apollo. Oh, and in the meantime he has to slay a massive serpent that lives at Delphi called Python (which 'explains' why the site could be known as Pytho and Apollo was worshipped there under the particular name Apollo Pythios)

The stories are fantastic and they were a fundamental part of Delphi, however they are creations of later generations of Greeks who were seeking to understand the world around them.

HIW: Ancient historian Herodotus speaks of the oracle at Delphi and others in his *Histories*, such as the tale of Croesus and Cyrus. How reliable a source is he?

MS: Herodotus is writing his big history – the first history – of the world at the end of the 5th century BCE. He was probably standing at Olympia during the Olympic Games making recitations of his work in the 420s BCE. The old style of looking at Herodotus was to treat everything he has to say. What here is factual truth so we know that King Croesus sent emissaries to see the oracle all the way from Lydia in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) to ask this important question." Now, people are more interested in two things.

Firstly, to look at the aims and goals of Herodotus as a writer. For example, it was clear that Herodotus was a big fan of oracle stories and there are tons of them in Histories. However, if we compare him to Thucydides, who takes up the Greek narrative directly after him, he does not like these stories. Thucydides is really not interested in oracles, [preferring] politics and fighting. So the Delphic oracle almost disappears from history there. It's the styles and interests of these writers that are really, really important.

The second thing with Herodotus – and what is really interesting – is how he uses an oracle and an oracle story to [highlight] what people shouldn't be doing. Croesus is a perfect example of this. Croesus sends emissaries to various oracles around the Greek world and tests them. No Greek would do something so stupid as to test the oracles; these are the gods we're talking about, you don't test the gods! But King Croesus thinks you can find out which oracle is "the best" so asks them to tell his emissaries what he is doing at a precise moment 100 days after they left. Of course, it is totally bizarre and, as the story goes, he was boiling a lamb and a tortoise together in a bronze cauldron and supposedly only Delphi got it right.

So now Croesus delivers his real question to Delphi, which is about war. The frame of the question, according to Herodotus, is: "whether he should make an expedition against the Persians and whether he should make any further host of man his friends." And we know that, if we compare that question to other Delphic questions that are asked in Herodotus's Histories, that off the bat Croesus has asked his question in the wrong way. It's not even worthy of a barbarian because the question ought to be much more open.

So then you get the famed ambiguity of the oracle's response to Croesus, which goes along the lines of, "Croesus, having crossed the Halys [a river], will destroy a great empire." Of course, Croesus misinterprets the message and thinks it means his enemy's empire will fall, when in fact it turns out to be his own.

HIW: The Pythia was a key figure at Delphi in the prophesying process. Tell us about her role.

MS: We do not have a single ancient source that tells us explicitly from beginning to end how a consultation with the Pythian prestess went. It is either assumed or we have to piece together what everyone knew about it and didn't bother writing it down, or so secretive that you weren't allowed to write it down.

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We know about certain stages. For example, if you were a consultant you turned up (said some money, waited in a queue (though certain people could skip this) and then entered the temple. However, it is from here that our knowledge becomes uncertain.

In fact, for such important individuals, who held sway and changed the tides of history, we know so little. We only know the names of but a couple of Pythian priestesses. We know they were usually women from the city of Delphi and that, although originally young women took the role, in later times women over 50 were more common. We also know that at one point the oracle was so popular they had two Pythian priestesses on the go and a third in reserve, and we also know a little about their daily routine. However, we do not know how they were 'inspired' [or enlightened] by Apollo.

One popular belief was that there were some vapours that emerged from a cavern beneath the temple that 'inspired' the priestess. However when they went to sacrificial sites such as Hierapolis (the 20th century has not yet given a sign of anything that have ever done lots of archaeological work showing that if someone is indoctrinated into a set of beliefs strongly enough it can almost be a self-hypnotic mechanism.

HIW: How important were the oracles of Ancient Greece to its culture in general?

MS: It's important that you have to picture yourself in a world where the gods are in control of everything. There is no way that any plan of yours is going to succeed unless the gods want it to. And in that kind of mindset, attention is not really an option. It's very hard to think outside the box. As such, it makes absolute sense to find out what the gods are planning and what they are happy to [endorse]. In that sense consulting an oracle is a completely rational occurrence. But what we have to factor in is that Delphi was just one place and just one way to consult the deities.

There were many other methods. You could watch the way water rippled, or the way leaves shook in the breeze. You could get an oracle paddles a guy on the street, to tell you the will of the gods by reading the [signs] in the bowels of the poor animals, looking at their pulsed and dried organs. You could even go and consult the dead at various sites.

What kind of oracular engagement you go for depends on different things [time and money being two major factors]. For example, to go from Athens to Delphi took several days and even then you could only go on one of nine days in the year (the only days the Pythian priestess was available). Once you were there you had to spend a good deal of money. In other words, it was a major undertaking.

Taking this into account, it's not surprising that at no point during Ancient Greek history do we find people rejecting in any real way oracular consultation as a useful and effective way of going about your business. And, more importantly, we don't have a single example of any big state question where the Delphic oracular response is ignored or controverted. The oracle can be misunderstood, even a different answer demanded, but it always holds sway for over a thousand years.

Dr Scott is research associate and affiliated lecturer at the Faculty of Classics and Darwin College, University of Cambridge, UK. He is working on two upcoming books: *Space And Society in Ancient Greece* and *The Archaeology of Delphi: Centre Of The Ancient World*, due to be published in November 2012 and in 2013, respectively.

Previous interviews such as that Dr Nicoli, you can go to www.ukcollectionofficial.com/nicoli/ and to Sparta in Thailand: www.kuan.com/

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