Greek Gods and Oracles

Going Greek

The Oracles

Ancient Greeks were fearful of offending their many gods. Some would use every means possible to find out beforehand what lay in the future. They tried star-reading, interpreting dreams, and examining the entrails of animals and the flight patterns of birds. The ancient Greeks also consulted soothsayers and oracles to divine the future. Public oracles were established all over Greece. The oracles of Zeus at Dodona and of Apollo at Delphi became famous.

Greeks believed females were more intuitive. At Delphi, three priestesses, each over 50 years old, were trained to consult the god Apollo through the medium of a trance. On the seventh day of each month, citizens came to Delphi to hear a prophecy. They paid handsomely to hear them. The priestesses worked in a hollow in the earth where natural gases seeped out. (Apollo, it was said, was slain there.) One priestess, called The Pythia, officiated. She took a high seat on a tripod in the grove of olive trees near the decomposed earth and gaseous area. She inhaled the vapors (“divine stench”), chewed on some laurel leaves, and then fell into a delirium with convulsions. Sometimes, The Pythia would utter a sentence or two of incoherent words. The priests nearby translated for the eagerly awaiting visitors.

To remind everyone who came there, there were two phrases carved clearly on upper walls of the temple. These were the words that all Greeks knew and tried to live by: “Know thyself” and “Nothing to excess.” Perhaps, though, if this advice was seriously followed, the oracles at the center of the Hellenic world would be out of business.

Oracles became powerful forces in Hellenic history. But they notoriously gave ambiguous information. In 546 BCE, Croesus (KREE-sus), the King of Lydia, asked the Oracle at Delphi whether or not to attack the Persians. The oracle replied: “If Croesus goes to war, he will destroy a great empire.” Believing he would win, Croesus went out to meet the army of Cyrus (SY-russ), the King of Persia, but was utterly defeated. The great empire he destroyed was his own.

What are several ways that ancient Greeks tried to foresee the future?

Why were many oracles female?

How often did citizens go to the Oracle of Delphi to hear a prophecy?

Who spoke the prophecies of Delphi? Why did she need priests to translate?

What are the two inscriptions on the temple at Delphi?

Explain how Croesus misinterpreted the oracle's response.
Let's suppose your polis went to the oracle for advice and she said,

"You will go you will return not in the battle you will perish."

What does that mean?

Sometimes it was not only ambiguity, but also bribery at play. In 480 BCE, Athenian leaders feared that Persian hordes were advancing on their city and rushed to Delphi for advice. When the oracle told them to get behind "the wooden wall," Themistocles (them-is-TAH-kleez), an aggressive Athenian archon, took this to mean that his people were not to hide like cowards literally behind walls, but to fight the Persians from the decks of 200 wooden ships (triremes) in the straights near Salamis.

A closer look at history, however, exposes a some-what different version. The facts seem to be these: Themistocles already had his battle plan and bribed the Oracle at Delphi to agree with him. She gave an ambiguous message that convinced the council and people of Athens of the merits of his strategy. In any case, his plan worked. The Greeks routed the Persians at the Battle of Salamis. This was one of several key battles that defeated the Persians and, thereafter, they never posed a threat. The Oracle at Delphi's reputation soared.

While it may be difficult for us to imagine a daily life dependent on multiple gods, oracles, and sacrifices, these beliefs were a significant part of ancient Greek life and culture. Ancient Greeks believed in many gods (polytheistic), while many people now believe in a single god (monotheistic). Today there are hundreds of religions practiced throughout the world. Some religions are more prominent, but most still provide the core for particular cultures.