

# Delphi

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**Delphi** (Greek Δελφοί — *Delphoî*) is an archaeological site and a modern town in Greece. In ancient times it was the site of the most important oracle of the god Apollo. Delphi was revered throughout the Greek world as the site of the *ομφαλός* (*omphalos*) stone, the centre of the universe. In the inner *εστία* (*hestia*), or hearth, of the Temple of Delphic Apollo (*Απόλλων Δελφίνιος* — *Apollon Delphinios*), an *ἀσβεστος φλόγα* (eternal flame) burned. After the battle of Plataea, the Greek cities extinguished their fires and brought new fire from the hearth of Greece, at Delphi; in the foundation stories of several Greek colonies, the founding colonists were first dedicated at Delphi (Burkert, 1985, pp. 61, 84).



The theatre, seen from above

## Contents

- 1 Location
- 2 Apollo
- 3 Oracle
- 4 Treasuries
- 5 Tholos
- 6 The "Delphic Sibyl"
- 7 Modern Delphi
- 8 See also
- 9 Footnotes
- 10 References
- 11 External links
  - 11.1 General
    - 11.1.1 Geology of Delphi

## Location

Delphi is located on a plateau on the slope of Mount Parnassus, adjacent to the Sanctuary of Apollo, the site of the ancient Apollonian Oracle. This semicircular spur is known as Phaedriades, and overlooks the Pleistos Valley. Southwest of Delphi, about 15 km away, is the harbor-city of Kirrha on the Corinthian Gulf.

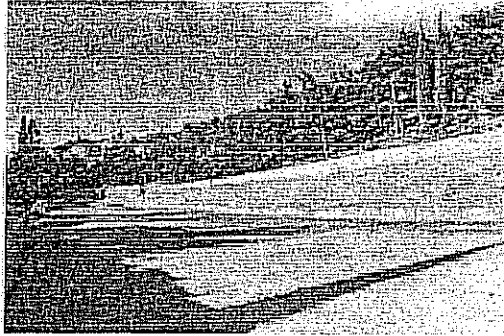
## Apollo

The name

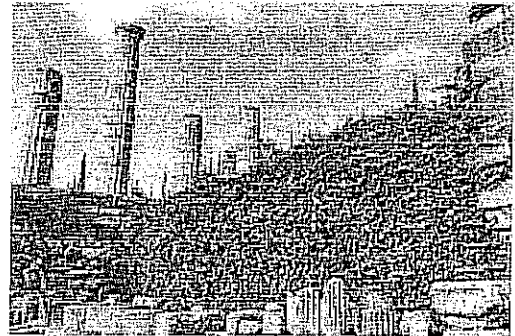
*Delphoi* is

connected with *δελφός* *delphus* "womb" and may indicate archaic veneration of an Earth Goddess at the site. Apollo is connected with the site by his epithet *Δελφίνιος* *Delphinios*, "the Delphinian", i.e. either "the one of Delphi", or "the one of the womb". The epithet is connected with dolphins (the "womb-fish") in the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* *Εἰς Απόλλωνα Πύθιον*, 400), telling how Apollo first came to Delphi in the shape of a dolphin, carrying Cretan priests on his back.

Another legend held that Apollo walked to Delphi from the north and stopped at Tempe, a city in Thessaly to pick laurel, a plant sacred to him. In commemoration of this legend, the winners at the Pythian Games received a laurel wreath picked in Tempe.



View of the stadium of the Delphi sanctuary, used for the Pythian Games. The stone steps on the right were added under the Romans.



The Temple of Apollo, seen from below

Delphi was the site of a major temple to Phoebus Apollo, as well as the Pythian Games and a famous oracle. Even in Roman times hundreds of votive statues remained, described by Pliny the Younger and seen by Pausanias.

When young, Apollo killed the chthonic serpent Python, which lived beside the Castalian Spring, according to some because Python had attempted to rape Leto while she was pregnant with Apollo and Artemis. This was the spring which emitted vapors that caused the Oracle at Delphi to give her prophesies. Apollo killed Python but had to be punished for it, since Python was a child of Gaia. The shrine dedicated to Apollo was probably originally dedicated to Gaia and then Poseidon.

Erwin Rohde wrote that the Python was an earth spirit, who was conquered by Apollo, and buried under the Omphalos, and that it is a case of one god setting up his temple on the grave of another. <sup>1</sup>

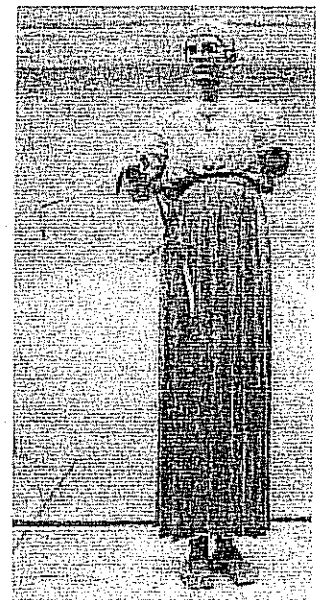
The oracle at that time predicted the future based on the lapping water and leaves rustling in the trees.

## Oracle

The biggest religious phenomenon during this era, which made the biggest impact on traditions, was undoubtedly the oracle at the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi on the southern slopes of Mount Parnassos in Central Greece. In the last quarter of the 8th Century BC we see a steady increase of artifacts found at the settlement site in Delphi. Pottery and bronze work and tripod dedications continue in a steady stream, in comparison to Olympia. Neither the range of objects nor the presence of prestigious dedications proves that Delphi was a focus of attention for worshippers of a wide range, but the strong representation of high value goods are found in no other mainland sanctuary, certainly encourages that view.

The first oracle at Delphi was commonly known as the Pythia, though her name was Herophile. She sang her predictions, which she received from Gaia. Later, "Sibyl" became a title given to whichever priestess manned the oracle at the time.

The Sibyl sat on the Sibylline Rock, breathing in vapors from the ground <sup>2</sup> and gaining her often puzzling predictions from that. Pausanias claimed that the Sibyl was "born between man and goddess, daughter of sea monsters and an immortal nymph". Others said she was sister or daughter to Apollo. Still others claimed the



The Pythian Games

Sibyl received her powers from Gaia originally, who passed the oracle to Themis, who passed it to Phoebé.

comprised a chariot race, thus this magnificent statue, the *Charioteer of Delphi*.

This oracle exerted considerable influence across the country, and was consulted before all major undertakings: wars, the founding of colonies, and so forth. She also was respected by the semi-Hellenic countries around the Greek world, such as Lydia, Caria, and even Egypt. Croesus of Lydia consulted Delphi before attacking Persia, and according to Herodotus received the answer "if you do, you will destroy a great empire." Croesus found the response favorable and attacked, and was utterly overthrown (resulting, of course, in the destruction of his own empire).

The oracle is also said to have proclaimed Socrates the wisest man in Greece, to which Socrates said that if so, this was because he alone was aware of his own ignorance. This claim is related to one of the most famous mottos of Delphi, which Socrates said he learned there, *Gnothi Seauton* (Γνώθι Σεαυτόν): "know thyself". Another famous motto of Delphi is *Meden Agan* (Μηδέν Ἄγαν): "nothing in excess".

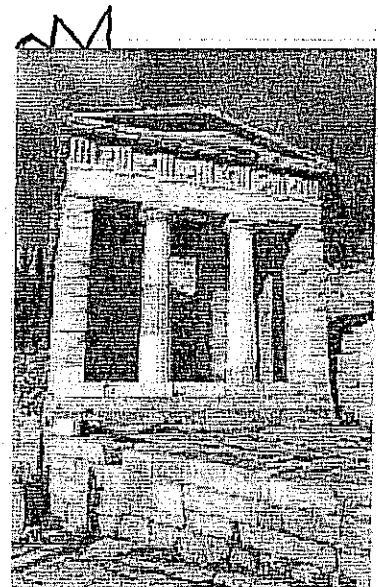
In the 3rd century A.D., the oracle (perhaps bribed) declared that the god would no longer speak there.

The temple to Apollo at Delphi was built by Trophonius and Agamedes.

Other archaeologists believe that the oracle also inhaled fumes of burning bay leaves.

## Treasuries

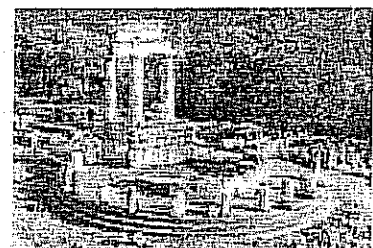
From the entrance of the site, continuing up the slope almost to the temple itself, is a large number of votive statues, and numerous treasuries. These were built by the various states – those overseas as well as those on the mainland – to commemorate victories and to thank the oracle for advice important to those victories. The most impressive is the now-restored Treasury of Athens, built to commemorate the Athenians' victory at the Battle of Marathon. The Athenians had previously been given the advice by the oracle to put their faith in their "wooden walls" – taking this advice to mean their navy, they won a famous battle at Salamis. Another impressive treasury that exists on the site was dedicated by the city of Siphnos, who had amassed great wealth from their silver and gold mines and so they dedicated the Siphnian Treasury.



The Treasury of Athens, built to commemorate their victory at the Battle of Marathon

## Tholos

The Tholos at the sanctuary of Athena Pronaia is a circular building that was constructed between 380 and 360 B.C. It consisted of 20 Doric columns arranged with an exterior diameter of 14.76 meters, with 10 Corinthian columns in the interior. The Tholos is located approximately a half-mile (800 m) from the main ruins at Delphi. Three of the Doric columns have been restored, making it the most popular site at Delphi for tourists to take photographs.



The Tholos at the sanctuary of Athena Pronaia





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## The Sphinx of Greek Mythology

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### Description

■ In ancient Greek mythology the Sphinx was depicted as a single, unique creature with the body of a lion, the wings of an eagle, and the head and breast of a human female. Apparently it was not an ugly creature, but it was vicious and single-minded. It is not reported as having unusual or monstrous size, so the Sphinx was probably imagined as the size of a large lion, possibly with the human head and eagle wings larger than normal to retain proportion.



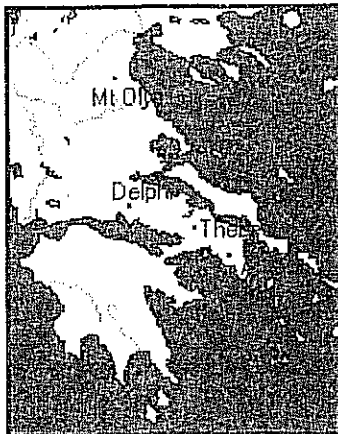
While our knowledge of the Egyptian and arabic sphinxes comes in large part from statues, the Greek Sphinx is known primarily through the writings of a handful of early authors. While there are a few representations of the Sphinx from urns, tomb art and drinking vessels that date to approximately 570 BCE, there are no statues extant today, or reported to have been built and subsequently lost.

### Heritage

■ The Sphinx was one of the ill-fated offspring of the monsters Typhon (which breathed fire, had a hundred venomous heads and was eventually pinned by Zeus under Mt. Etna), and Echidna (which had a beautiful nymph's head and the body of a giant serpent). Other offspring of Echidna were the Nemean Lion, Cerberus, Ladon, Chimaera and Hydra.

## Sources & the Riddle

■ Although the story varies slightly based on the source, the Sphinx is probably best known through the plays of Sophocles, in the tragedies of Oedipus (written circa 425 BCE), and the works of Apollodorus. Oedipus was the son of Laius, the king of Thebes, and his queen, Jacosta. A prophetic oracle had been given that the son would kill his father, so Laius sent him out to be slain. However, he was found and raised by peasants, completely unaware of his heritage. Once grown, he met his father on the road, and in an argument over who should make way, Oedipus killed him.



[Click for a larger, more detailed map of ancient Greece](#)

Not long after, Thebes was plagued by the Sphinx, which sat on a high rock by a road near Thebes and posed a riddle it had learned from the Muses to all who passed. The riddle, reported or translated in slightly different words, was: "What animal has one voice, but goes on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and upon three legs in the evening?" The Sphinx strangled all who could not answer its riddle.

Other versions of the story state that the Sphinx was sent by Hera, sat on Mt. Phicium, or sat on the city walls of Thebes, and in at least one story, that the Sphinx actively devoured the citizens of the town until its riddle could be answered. In the latter story, Thebes offered the reward of kingship and the former queen as wife to anyone who could answer the riddle and rid Thebes of the Sphinx.

Oedipus was able to answer the Sphinx, "Man, who in childhood creeps on hands and knees, in manhood walks erect, and in old age with the aid of a staff." The Sphinx became so distraught that its riddle had been solved that it threw itself from the rock to its death. As a reward, the people of Thebes made Oedipus their king, and he took the former queen Jacosta as his wife. Thus the tragic prophesy was fulfilled that Oedipus would slay his father and marry his mother. When Oedipus learned the truth, he went insane, gouged out his eyes, and wandered the countryside, cared for by his daughters until his death.



Thus the phrase, "riddle of the Sphinx" is most appropriately applied to the Greek Sphinx, though it is now often applied to Egyptian Sphinx, with the connotation of being mysterious and enigmatic.

This story is the source of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's

naming of the Oedipus complex, the theoretical stage of childhood development where a male child has a strong attraction to his mother, and jealous or hostile feelings toward his father.

It has also been noted in the literature that a very similar riddle appears in diverse cultures with no apparent influence or derivation from the Greek.

### Name and Meaning

■ The name "Sphinx" derives from the Greek word "sphingo," to strangle, or "sphingein," to bind tight, based on its habit of strangling its victims. The name was subsequently applied to the Egyptian and other arabic sphinxes because of their physical similarity to descriptions of the mythical Greek Sphinx.



*Relief detail of Sphinx from tomb*

The Sphinx was considered a demon of death, devouring, destruction and bad luck. This is in contrast to the Egyptian and arabic sphinxes which were usually represented as guardians that embodied wisdom, strength, nobility and a relatively benign attitude toward human beings (at least those who did not violate what they were set to guard).

One current meaning of the word "sphinx" is "an enigmatic or mysterious person." The development of this particular usage arose from the fact that "enigma" also derives from the Greek "ainigma," 'to speak in riddles,' with perhaps the added influence of the inscrutable and mysterious Great Sphinx of Egypt.

### Similar creatures

■ The Sphinx is certainly not alone in the mythological annals of combination or hybrid creatures. The most notable, and similar, (excluding the Egyptian and arabian sphinxes) include:



*Chimera*

#### *Chimaera*

A sibling of the Sphinx, it was formed of a lion's body and head, combined with the head of a goat or ram, and the tail of a serpent or dragon. It was dispatched by the hero Bellerophon, who enlisted the winged horse Pegasus as his steed for the task.

#### *Griffin (Gryphon)*

A ferocious class of monsters with the body of a

lion, the head and wings of an eagle, and great talons.

#### *Centaur*

Another class of monster, but intelligent, imbued with good traits and on generally good terms with men. They had the body of a horse and the upper torso and head of a man. Their tendency to drunken behavior often led to problems. Zeus turned the centaur Chiron, a tutor, into the constellation Sagittarius after Chiron asked for the release of death over a wound that would not heal. He, as Sagittarius, is represented also represented in the ninth sign of the zodiac.

#### *Manticore*

This creature had the body of a lion, the head of a man (sometimes a lion's head) and the tail of a scorpion or dragon. It was a popular image in medieval heraldry.

#### *Harpy (Harpies)*

Three creatures from Greek myth that had the head or upper body of a woman and the remaining body of a large bird. In early myth they were attractive winged women, but they are better known as ugly creatures responsible for tormenting and kidnapping humans. In modern usage "harpy" refers to a shrewish woman.

#### *Minotaur*

It had the body of a man with the head and tail of a bull. It was so destructive king Minos imprisoned it in the famous labyrinth on Crete, where it was given human sacrifices and was later killed by Theseus.

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