

I count the grains of sand on the beach and measure the sea
 I understand the speech of the mute and hear the voiceless
 —Delphic Oracle [Herodotus, I, 47]

In the center of the world, a fissure opened from the black depths of Earth, and waters flowed from a spring. The place was called Delphi (“Womb”). In its cave sanctuary lived a shamanic priestess called the Pythia—Serpent Woman. Her prophetic power came from a python in the Castalian spring. She sat on a tripod, breathing vapors that emerged from a deep cleft in the Earth, until she entered trance and prophesied in verse.

The shrine was sacred to Ge, the indigenous Aegean earth goddess. The Greeks called her Gaea. Some people think the name Ge-Meter (“Earth-Mother”) evolved into Demeter. Gaea was said to have been the first Delphic priestess. This idea of Earth as the original oracle turns up elsewhere. In *The Eumenides* a priestess intones, “First in my prayer I call on Earth, primeval prophetess...” [Harrison, 385] The ancients said that there was once an oracle of Earth at the Gaeum in Olympia. [Pausanias, V, xiv, Fr258]

Earth's daughter, Themis, was also a Pythia. Aeschylus called the two “Themis and Gaia, one in nature, many named.” [*Prometheus Bound*, in Harrison, 480] They were Titans, elder deities overthrown by the classical Greek gods. Themis signifies all-wise Justice, Right, Law. (Her name comes from the same root as the English *doom*, which originally meant “judgment,” then fate, and only later downfall.) Themis was the “good counselor,” the “queen of oracles.” [Larousse, 136] The prophecies that her seeresses uttered were called *themistes*, “ordinances.” [Harrison, 482-83, 387] As Soteira (“protector, savior”), Themis punished the guilty. [Aeschylus, in Goodrich, 199]

Themis was clearly no mortal woman, but myth depicted her as a powerful priestess in the manner of Isis and Inanna. It was Themis who convened and dissolved the assemblies of the gods. Her true might is discernable from her divine children: the Moirae (Fates) and the Horai (Seasons). [Harrison, 482, 515] The eldest of the Horai was Dike, the Way, whose wheel represented the coursing of the sun, moon and stars through the universe. Dike controlled the doors of Day and Night. She also endowed every living being with its own true nature. [Harrison, 482, 515-18, 522-4]

The ancient Pelasgians had prophetesses in the shrine of Delphi before there was a Greece. The Delphic priest Plutarch averred that they “once belonged solely to Earth and Earth's temple,” and that they had been prophesying for a thousand years. [*De Pythiae Oraculis*, in Goodrich, 210, 203]

The long line of Delphic oracles was said to have originated in north Africa. A Greek tradition held that the Libyan goddess Lamia gave birth to the first Pythia, fathered by Zeus. Lamia was called “the first woman who chanted oracles, and they say that she was named Sibyl by the Libyans.” [Pausanias, X, xii] This story accords with other Greek accounts of north African settlements and cultural influence, as well as archaeological finds of archaic Greek vessels with human figurines painted in a Libyan style. This African influence is most dramatically reflected in the tradition that “Black Doves” founded the oracular shrine of Dodona (see below).

Pausanias reports that Herophile the Sibyl “used to stand and chant her oracles” on a rock that rose from the ground at Delphi, in the time before the Trojan war. This “plain-speaking Sibyl” was said to have visited many other sanctuaries around the Aegean. [Frazer,

516] The name Sibyla originated in the word *sibyllainein*, "to be inspired in one's tongue." [Diodorus Siculus, IV. 66. 31] In both of these origin stories, Lamia and Herophile are represented as chanting oracles, underlying the importance of shamanic incantation in the Delphic root tradition.

Greek legend records that the sun god took over Delphi and other archaic oracles, supplanting Ge and killing her water serpent. This being is described as a female *drákainenin* in the Homeric *Eis Apollona*, but later writers masculinized the dragon as Python. Many sources describe him as a son of Ge. [Olmsted, 253-4; Fontenrose 1957: 13, 47] They said that Apollo killed Python, "a dragon set by Earth to guard the oracle," who had tried to prevent the usurper from entering the underground sanctuary. [Pausanias, X, vi, Fr507] Hyginus wrote that Python's bones were kept in a cauldron at Delphi. [Olmsted, 254-5] Others said that he was buried beneath the Omphalos stone, navel of the Earth, on which the Pythia rested her hand. [Goodrich, 200] Also near Delphi was the Stone of Rhea, also called Pythos. Chronos kept swallowing her children, so she gave him a stone instead of Zeus. When he was forced to disgorge all that he had devoured, the stone fell to Parnassus above Delphi.

Greek tradition clearly shows Apollo displacing Gaea-Themis as guardian deity of the ancient chthonic sanctuary. This takeover happened during the tenure of the Pythia Phoebe, according to Aeschylus. [Goodrich, 26] This third Pythia was said to have given her oracle and name (Phoebus) to Apollo. The dragon's overthrow was more gradual than the legend suggests. The goddess and her snake were still potent. Ovid reported that the Pythian games (originally musical poetic competitions) were instituted to honor Python and to placate Gaea. Every eight years a hut was set up to represent the dragon's house, and a boy led a ritual attack on it with torches. This representative of Apollo then had to serve as a menial for a year, just as legend said the god was made to do as penance for killing the dragon. [Frazer, III, 53-4; Fontenrose 1957: 456]

According to Pausanias, the first prophetess after the Apollonian takeover was Phemenoë. She began the tradition of singing the oracle in hexameters. In those days the temple was a simple hut built out of laurel boughs. Legend says a second temple was "made by bees out of wax and feathers," or of twined mountain ferns, and that a third, bronze temple vanished into a chasm in the earth during an earthquake. [Pausanias, X, v; Frazer, 505-6]



The Pythia continued to prophesy in the cave chamber fed by underground waters. She began by drinking from and bathing in the holy spring. Then, wrote Plutarch, "The Pythia goes down into her inner shrine where she burns laurel and barley flour on the altar." [*De Pythiae*

Oraculis, in Goodrich, 210] She held a laurel sprig in her right hand and a bowl of spring water in her left. A rather late Roman account by Lucan says she chewed laurel leaves in order to enter trance.

Daphne is one of the names for laurel, and had strong oracular connections. It was said that the nymph Daphnis was the first prophetess at Delphi. [Pausanias, 10.5.5] The title Daphne was also applied to the prophetess Manto, who left Delphi to found another oracular shrine in Analolia. [Dio. Sic. 4.66.5] Other traditions equated Daphne with Pasiphae, who had an oracle at Thalamai. [Lyons, #276]

The legend explaining how laurel became sacred to Apollo revisits the conquest narrative of the shrine. The god pursued the nymph Daphne with the intention of raping her. She appealed to her mother Ge to save her from rape, and was turned into a laurel tree just as her attacker caught up with her. Apollo's claim on Delphi went only so deep, and his usurpation was never complete. [Molnar, et alii] The Pyndaric scholiast wrote that Night was the first to speak oracles at Delphi. [Fontenrose 1957: 415] Well into Roman times, the Delphic priest Plutarch still wrote of the oracle as belonging to "Night and the Moon." [Harrison, 388]

The divining pebbles called *thriae* or *psephoi* were another survival of the struggle with Apollo. They were pictured as three winged sisters who lived on nearby Mt Parnassus. They "eat honeycomb, and bring everything to pass." They are teachers of divination, and their seniority to Apollo is indicated by traditions that they taught him and later, that they nursed him. Several sources call them the first mantis ("diviners"). One hymn called them the *parthenoi*, virgins. Apollo also calls them *moirae* (fates) or *semnai* (a title of Erinyes). [Fontenrose 1957: 427-29]

Another legend said that Athena had originated these divining pebbles. The veneration of Athena Pronaia was very important at Delphi, and older than the cult of Apollo. [Fontenrose 1957: 432 n. 37] Apollo disdained this form of divination, and so Zeus caused it "to fall into discredit, though it had been in high repute before..." Nonetheless, divining pebbles remained in a bowl on a tripod at the Delphi temple, and "the pebbles danced about in the bowl, while the inspired priestess prophesied." [Frazer note on Apollodorus, II, 10-11]

The classicist Fontenrose was convinced that the nearby shrine of Lykoreia—the Corycian Cave—was the original shrine. This oracular cave was an incubation chamber connected to dreams of the dead. [Fontenrose 1957: 413] Euripides gives evidence of "keen competition" between Lykoreia's chthonic dream oracles and Delphi. [Frazer, 430-1] Euripides' mythical history of Delphi describes Ge as taking honor away from Apollo's oracles by sending dream visions to reveal the future. Apollo went complaining to Zeus, who ended the dream oracle so that the sun god was again pre-eminent. [Fontenrose 1957: 431]

People journeyed from distant countries to consult the Delphic oracle. Traditionally queries were answered on the 7th day of the month. Each questioner had to go through a series of ritual acts: fasting, seclusion, immersion in the holy spring, robing, procession, offering ritual cakes and a sacrificial animal, ascension to the oracle and hearing her word. [Goodrich, 202] Prophecy would only be given if the sacrificial goat shivered after being drenched with icy water.

From the dark inner sanctuary, the Pythias spoke sonorously, saying sooth in

enigmatic verse. Some said that she was inspired by the breath of Python. [Fontenrose 1957: 417] Plutarch wrote that spirits breathed into the Pythia, inspiring her prophecy and causing her to give off a beautiful fragrance. [*De Oraculum Defectu*, in Goodrich, 211] She “sang of what was to be as she was borne round in the face of the moon.” [Harrison, 389]

The oracles of Delphi had foretold the Trojan war, according to Strabo, Pausanias, and other sources. But the Pythias went beyond prophesy; they directed, judged, warned, prohibited wrongdoing, discoursed on tradition and history, and interpreted mysteries. Their pronouncements decided momentous events: who would rule and where cities would be founded. They gave laws, settled disputes, and chided tyrannical kings. That two Lacedaemonian royal houses existed was due to “the pleasure of the Pythian priestess.” [Pausanias, III, I; Frazer 133]

When Lycurgus of Sparta consulted the Delphic oracle in the early 8th century, she gave his city a constitution and popular assemblies that allowed the people a say in all matters. She advised that all land and wealth were to be equally redistributed, including the poor in the bounty. [Goodrich, 237-50] The Pythia told Lycurgus that his city faced two paths, one of concord and freedom, the other of “loathsome strife and weak delusion.” She warned against greed, which would alone cause Sparta to fall. “And in the body of the folk let there/ Reside decision and the power.” [Diodorus Siculus, VII, 12, 2 and 6] However, history shows that the peon class of helots did not share in this power.

The entrance to the Delphic sanctuary bore sage inscriptions: “Know thyself” and “Nothing in excess.” [Pausanias, X, xxiv; Frazer 535] Diogenes Laertius, the biographer of Pythagoras, wrote that the Pythia prophesied that his mother, then pregnant, would bear a holy child. She then named her son after the Pythia. As a young man, Pythagoras studied with the Delphic oracle Themistoclea, and according to Aristoxenus, learned most of his moral doctrines from her. Thus the man who coined the word “philosophy” sat at the feet of a woman philosopher at Delphi. [“Themistoclea – 600 BCE – woman philosopher,” <http://www.women-philosophers.com/Themistoclea.html>, accessed July 15, 2009]

There was no virginity requirement for the Pythias, as with some other Greek priestesses. They were originally youthful but after one was abducted, started to be chosen from women over fifty. Care was taken to maintain a peaceful atmosphere for the priestesses who were protected and sheltered from discord and harmful influences so that they could act as divine channels.

The Pythia was a woman “raised in a poor peasant household” in the first century, the time of Plutarch. To his mind, that meant that she brought “not one iota of art, knowledge or talent” to the shrine, only a “virgin soul.” [Zaidman, 375] What mattered was that she must have a noble character: “She cares nothing for the plaudits or censure that men may care to judge her by.” [*De Pythiae Oraculis*, in Goodrich, 210] Only once was a Pythia suborned through bribery, ruling in favor of the Spartan conqueror Cleomenes. [Pausanias, III, iv; Frazer, 137-8]

MORE ORACULAR WOMEN

Delphi was the most renowned of many oracular spring-sanctuaries. The Erythraean sibyl prophesied at a spring in a cave. The celibate female oracle at Larisa tasted the blood of

a night-sacrificed lamb in order to prophesy. [Pausanias, II, xxiv, 107] At Aegira, it was bull's blood that the seeress drank to attain trance, then descended to a cave to prophesy. This oracular sanctuary belonged to Earth, housing a very ancient wooden image of Broad-bosomed Ge. Her celibate seeresses were sometimes chosen by lots. [Pliny, *Natural History* xxviii, 147, in Fr IV, 175; Pausanias VII, xxv] Another oracle of Earth once existed at Olympia, but had disappeared by the 2nd century. [Apollodorus, note, p. 10]

Some classical writers name Dodona as the oldest oracular shrine in Greece. Located in the northwestern mountains near Albania, it was originally an open-air sanctuary around an ancient oak. Dodona was named after the nymph Dodone and originally consecrated to the great goddess Dione, whose name comes from an ancient Indo-European root word meaning "shining." From this same root come words for "day" and "deity," including the Greek god Zeus.

Dione eventually was made to marry and share the oracle with Zeus Naos, but she remained an important goddess at Dodona, though gradually forgotten elsewhere. Homer speaks of seers of Zeus called the Selloi, who "dwell with feet like roots, unwashed, and make their beds on the ground." [*Iliad*, 16:127] Hesiod called them "acorn-eaters." Revelation came to them in the rustling of the oak and the movements and calls of the pigeons. Tradition held that these "words of the oak... were the first prophetic utterances," according to Plato [in *Phaedrus*]

But there were also prophetesses at Dodona called Peleae ("doves"), as we know from Herodotus, Pausanias, and Strabo. Herodotus cites an Egyptian tradition that Phoenicians had carried off two priestesses of "Theban Zeus" and sold them, one in Libya, the other in Greece. These women founded the famous oracles of Amun at a Libyan oasis and of Zeus at Dodona. But Herodotus says that the Dodona priestesses Promeneia, Timarete and Nicandra gave him a different description of their origins:

two black doves, they say, flew away from Thebes in Egypt, and one of them alighted at Dodona, the other in Libya. The former perched on an oak, and speaking with a human voice, told them that there, on that very spot, there should be an oracle of Zeus... As to the bird being black, they merely signify by this that the woman was an Egyptian. It is certainly true that the oracles at Thebes and Dodona are similar in character. [Herodotus, II, 55-6]

Herodotus wrote that this first Egyptian priestess was Thesprotia, and that "as soon as she understood the Greek language, she taught divination."

Strabo wrote that the priestesses drew auguries from observing three sacred doves. He noted that the Molossians and Thesprotians called old women *peliai*, so that the title meant "elders" as well. Pausanias also referred to "the oracles given by the doves" at Dodona. He wrote that the oracle Phaennis foretold the Celtic invasion of Asia Minor "a generation before the event took place." [Pausanias, VII, xxi, 21 Frazer, 149f; X, xv; Fr 521]

Dodona had a famous wind oracle as well. A bronze statue of a boy held a scourge with bones suspended from it, which struck copper cauldrons arranged beneath, emitting long tones. This "copper vessel in Dodona" became proverbial. [Strabo, VII, 325] Another oracle where "three old women were designated as prophets" was located at Mt. Tomarus in Thessaly. Strabo wrote that the temple and its priestesses were later moved to Greece. [Strabo VII, 323; 7.7.12] The power of the Dodona oaks retained a high repute, and one of them

which Athena carved into the prow of Jason's ship the Argo had prophetic power.

As at Delphi, Apollo claimed the oracles of Didyma, where Artemis Pythia was worshipped, and of Claros, both in western Anatolia. [Fontenrose, 187, on Artemis Pythia] Also like Delphi, the Claros sanctuary had an *omphalos* stone, but its oracle was a man. He entered trance by drinking water from the spring, and during the ecstasy "he is not in control of himself and does not follow what he is saying, or where he is..." [Iamblichus, in Olmsted, 257]

The female oracles at Didyma in Asia Minor also show signs of entering into shamanic states, as they were sometimes called "the Grunters." [Holland-Smith, 31] The seeress prepared for prophesy through "a rule of complete purity," retreating for three days to fast and sacrifice. She then descended to the innermost, unroofed chamber of the sacred spring. She drank from its waters; some say she placed her feet in them, others that she wetted the hem of her robe. Then the oracle sat on a cylindrical stone axon, breathing water vapor from the sacred pool while a choir sang. She held a sacred wand that, as Iamblichus wrote, filled her with divine light. Questioners stood at the threshold of the holy of holies to hear the oracle's response. [Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Lucian, in Fontenrose, 197-8, who thinks the stone axis at Didyma may have been a tripod. He cites a reference by Constantine to the oracles of the tripods.]

*Entranced priestess dancing with wand,
circa 1500 BCE. Stone seal from Vapheio.*

Only one name—Tryphosa—has survived of the Didyma priestesses, though city and temple decrees listed the names of the male priests. [Lane, 223] Likewise, only a few of the Pythias' names have come down to us, including Phemenoë, Xenocleia, Themistoclea, Aristonicé, Clea, and Herophile. The priestesses themselves are veiled from history.

Apollo's takeover of the Delphic oracle marked a succession of expropriations in which worldly powers intruded on the sanctuary. Male priests came in to interpret the Pythias' prophecies. At some point, women were forbidden to enter the temple or consult the oracle, though all males of Delphi inherited "right of access." [Pomeroy, 33, Goodrich, 199] Strabo was told that Apollo conquered the Pythia because he wanted the oracle for men only. But the reason given was less than flattering: men needed to be taught gentility and self-control. [Goodrich, 204]

Ruling families seized control of the oracular shrines, and even fought a war over the rulership of Delphi, around 357 BCE. [Goodrich, 235, 239] Eventually they barred priestesses who came from the common people. In Plutarch's time the Pythia of Delphi was a peasant woman, but by the year 200 she had to be a noble lady. [Lane, 238] As the Delphic oracle was being corrupted in this way, the Romano-Syrian writer Lucan lamented,



The Pythia has lost her voice, however, which has occasioned a sad loss for men of my generation. Our kings dared no longer appeal to her, so fearfully do we all dread the future now. The powerful of our day have shut her mouth. [*Pharsalia*, Goodrich, 213]

SNAKE PRIESTESSES

Delphi was not the only shrine inhabited by serpents. Snake oracles can be traced back to at least the second millennium BCE, with the famous Cretan statuettes holding snakes coiled around their arms and seals showing women worshipping a goddess with serpent attributes. Snake vessels with female figures suggest similar oracles in Attica around 650 BCE. Even older are the Cretan and Canaanite “snake tubes,” which are probably linked to ancestral libations.

Serpent dancers are recorded in Asia Minor, where the Phrygian priestess of Sabazios slipped a golden snake through her robes and to the ground: the “god through the bosom.” [Thomson, 235] Even later, bishop Clement of Alexandria described an initiate of the mysteries drawing a live serpent across the breast: “the god who penetrates the bosom.” [Godwin, 153]

The snake-priestesses also persisted in classical Greece. A maiden priestess tended snakes at a grove sanctuary in Epiros. Only she could enter their circular enclosure, and she came to them naked, bringing them honey cakes. “Now if when the priestess comes near them the snakes are seen to be gentle, and if they take to their food kindly, that is taken to mean that there will be a plentiful year and free from disease; but if they frighten her, and do not take the honey-cakes she offers them, then they portend the reverse.” [Aelian, in Harrison, 429]

In Elis, a line of priestesses fed a snake living in an archaic hillside sanctuary of Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth. An old woman was chosen every year to bring water to bathe the infant snake god and to offer barley-cakes made with honey. The women waited outside, burning incense and singing hymns. [Harrison, 240] Another snake was kept in the shrine of Erectheus at the Acropolis. Athena wore its emblem on her breastplate. [Thomson, 115-6] At the time of the Persian invasion, many people fled Athens after the snake refused its honey-cake. [Harrison, 267]

The staying power of the old oracular traditions was great, even when the new gods displaced the original tutelary goddess. Dio Chrysostom wrote of his encounter with an old peasant woman, guardian of a shrine of Zeus near Olympia. The Mother of the Gods had gifted her with the prophetic art, and farmers came to consult her about crops and animals. [Thomson, 289]

MELISSAE

Serpents were not the only oracular animal. The sancrosanct *pangeis* priestesses who preserved the women's mysteries at Eleusis were called *melissae*, “bees.” Little is known about them, except that they lived apart from men. [Pomeroy, 75-7] Priestesses of Demeter and

Persephone also seem to have carried this title in other locations. Colleges of *melissae* are mentioned for other locations, such as the Temple of Artemis at Ephesos (where the male priests were called *essenae*, “drones”) and the sanctuary of Aphrodite at Eryx in Sicily. *Melissa* was also a title of the Pythias. Pindar called them “bees,” and Pausanias described the second temple of Delphi as made by bees out of honeycomb and feathers. [Fontenrose 1957:428]

The first *melissae* were nymphs who discovered honey and who were sometimes themselves symbolized by or described as bees. Here we return to the divinatory *thryiai*. The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* describes them as “holy ones, sisters born—three virgins gifted with wings: their heads are besprinkled with white meal, and they dwell under a ridge of Parnassus.” [lines 553-63] The poem sets apart these pollen-crowned “teachers of divination” as an exemption to Apollo's claims on the prophetic arts. “From their home they fly now here, now there, feeding on honey-comb and bringing all things to pass.” [*Homer: Hymn to Hermes*, Online: <www.piney.com/ClassHomHymHermes.html>] These verses imply that the three sisters are fateful goddesses, even bees, rather than human oracles.

Adrienne Mayor has interpreted the passage that follows as a reference to these oracular bees as “women who revealed the future while under the influence of ‘maddening’ fresh honey.” They entered prophetic ecstasy by eating the “food of the gods,” *meli chloron* (green honey). [Mayor, 40]

**Divinely maddened, they are inspired to speak the truth
But if they are deprived of the divine honeycomb
They cannot prophesy.**

Mayor assembled a body of evidence that this “mad” honey was unripe, “green” honey from rhododendrons that contained psychoactive grayanotoxins. (*Meli chloron* can be translated as “green,” “fresh,” or “yellow” honey.) She notes that the *Hymn* compares the prophetic frenzy of the *melissae* to the transports of maenads. According to Euripides, the maenads waved “wands flowing with honey,” and drank mead (honey wine) which sent them into a prophetic madness. This *meli maenomenon* (“mad” or “raving” honey) was known to the natural historian Pliny. Xenophon described how it laid low a Persian army in Asia Minor, whose tribes used it to poison Roman troops centuries later. Modern Turks call the psychotropic honey *deli bal*. They take it in small doses as a tonic, and use it to punch up alcoholic drinks. In the Caucasus, too, people spiked their liquor with Pontic azalea honey. [Mayor, 33-40] However, Mayor's interpretation turns on how the *Hymn to Hermes* is translated. A more conventional rendition of the passage runs, “And when they are inspired through eating yellow honey, they are willing to speak truth; but if they be deprived of the gods' sweet food, then they speak falsely, as they swarm in and out together.”

Roman sources said that the Pythias chewed or burned laurel leaves. Lucian reported this of the Didyma priestesses as well. We've seen that the Greek name for bay laurel was *daphne*. Mayor points out that other species of *daphne*, such as *rhododaphne* or *rhododendron*, contain hallucinogenic grayanotoxins. So do oleander and azaleas, whose names the ancients often confused with laurel and *rhododendron*. The Romans may not have meant bay laurel, but another plant of the *Daphne* genus. Some of these plants are highly toxic, and chewing their leaves could easily be fatal. But it is possible that a lesser quantity of grayanotoxins, such as found in honey, might have been used to attain trance

states. [Mayor, 33-40; Fontenrose, 198, on Didyma.] Or it could be that seers attained religious ecstasies simply by eating the sacred food of the Moirae.

Later classical authors speculated that the Pythias' trances were caused by fumes rising from deep in the earth at the Delphic cavern. Some attributed the oracle's decline to the disappearance of these inspirational gases. [Frazer cites Diodorus Siculus, xvi, 26; Strabo ix, 3, 5; Pausanias, x, 5, 7; and Justin xxiv, 6, 6-9, in his notes on Apollodorus, p 10-11] Plutarch described sweet-smelling vapors that emerged from rocks beneath the *adyton* holy of holies. He wrote that the "exhalations" occurred irregularly and varied in intensity, demanding careful oversight of the signs and of the Pythias' physical state. [*De Defectu Oraculorum*]

A recent study by geologist Jelle De Boer and archaeologist John Hale has revived the theory of chthonic vapors. They found that two geological faults intersect beneath the Delphic sanctuary, and that the crushing of bituminous limestone during seismic activity could have caused emission of hydrocarbon gases such as methane and ethylene. The latter is sweet-smelling and causes euphoria and a sensation of floating. [De Boer, J.Z., Hale, J.R. and Chanton, J., "New evidence of the geological origins of the ancient Delphic oracle (Greece)," *Geology*, #29, 2001, pp 707-710; see also Broad, William, "Greek Oracle Fueled by Vapors," *New York Times*, April 18, 2002] Large doses of this gas can be fatal, as ancient reports of occasional deaths of Pythias in the sacred chamber bear out.

THE MOIRAE

Honey is the divine food that sustains the mightiest deities in the Greek pantheon: the Fates. The Moirae assign destiny to all beings, even the gods. Their spinning lays a pattern of power that has momentum in time and space. They sing fate as they spin, garlanded and robed in white. They are the daughters of Necessity, on whose knees their spindle turns. [Grimm, 1377, 414; Davidson, HE, 98] Another version calls them the daughters of Night, who live near a pool fed by a cavern. [Branston, 64]

One of the older sources, Homer, refers to Moera in the singular, as "powerful Moera" and as the spinner of human lives at birth, and also as plural Moerae or Klothes. Later the Fates are clearly threefold. The first Moira is named Klotho, "Spinner." Lakhesis—"Lot or Portion Giver"—measures out each life in the spun fiber of life-force. Atropos, the Moira with the power of death, cuts the thread of life. Once the thread of life has passed through her hands it cannot be undone. Atropos means "not turning, not changing," and the fate she ordains is inexorable. [Thomson, 334-5] She is small in stature but the oldest and greatest of the Fates. [Grimm, 414]

The Vision of Eir in Plato's *Republic* describes how souls in an underworld meadow hear the song of Lakhesis. Eir witnesses cosmological mysteries: a pillar of light intersects heaven and earth, upholding "all the revolving firmament." From this pillar reach bonds connecting to the farthest extremities of heaven. "And from the extremities stretched the Spindle of Necessity, by means of which all the circles revolve." The goddess Ananke (Necessity) holds this Spindle, whose whorls are the planetary system. The Fates sit beside it "as they unwind the threads of men's lives." [*Republic*, Book X, in Santayana, 230-32]

Homer and the classical playwright Aeschylus acknowledged the supremacy of the Moirae in the primordial cosmology. The Olympian gods received their powers from the Moirae and did not dare to violate their allotments. [Thompson, 346; Harrison, 476] Hesiod spoke of “the Moirae to whom wise Zeus gave the greatest honor.” [Theogony, 901] Nevertheless, in classic literature the younger patriarchal gods thrust these primal goddesses aside, usurping their powers. Later writers call Olympian Zeus and Delphic Apollo *moiragetes* (Guide of Fate). Zeus and Apollo even physically displaced one of the Fates on the Delphic altar of Poseidon. [Pausanias, X, xxiv, Fr 536; Fontenrose 1957:429] By 140 BCE, Apollodorus was calling the Moirae the “daughters” of Zeus and Themis. [I, 3] They gradually became more distant figures, though shrines consecrated to them remained in some places. [Ibid, III, xi, on a Lacedaemonian shrine.]

The goddess Nemesis represents the “inexorable” divine Law. She is also called Adrasteia, “inevitable.” Her veneration was centered in Asia Minor, often as a double goddess. Coins show a pair of Nemeses driving a chariot drawn by griffins, or holding their right hands to one breast, the left with a bridle or sceptre, and a wheel at their feet. [Frazer on P: IV, 125] This symbol is old; Polyxena in the *Iliad* refers to a wheel of Destiny. Nemesis keeps silence, finger to lips. She too is a daughter of Night. [Thomson, 346; Larousse, 163]

The goddesses of Fate dealt out consequences for injustice. Like Nemesis, the Erinnyes (“Furies”) are “children of Eternal Night,” “Daughters of the Earth and Shadow.” [Aeschylus, Sophocles in Larousse, 166] Their names were Alecto, Tisiphone, and Megaera. They were serpentine and black, representing the ancestral mothers. The Erinnyes acted as karmic agents, pursuing unto death those that offended natural law, above all those who shed the blood of mothers. Bearing torches and whips, they came to sit at the threshold of a guilty person's house: “None could escape them, who reached even beyond death.” [Check for quote in Larousse, 166; Thomson, 117]

Yet a temple in Athens honored the Erinnyes as Eumenides, “benevolent ones.” They were also called “the Venerable,” according to Pausanias, who added, “There is nothing terrible in their images.” But they drove mad any guilty, defiled or impious person who entered their sanctuary. [I, xxxi, xxviii]

The Furies probably originated from Arcadia, where people worshipped a wrathful Demeter Erinnyes. A scholiast recounted how Poseidon followed Demeter in her wanderings as she searched for her abducted daughter Persephone. She took mare form to avoid her brother, but he turned into a stallion and raped her. “Demeter’s anger at being so used gave her the name of Erinnyes...” Their daughter Despoina, “mistress,” was worshipped alongside Black Demeter (Melaina) at Phigalia and at Lykosura. Coins of Thelpusa show this Demeter with the snaky hair of an Erinys. [Fontenrose 1957: 367-69]

Another goddess of fortune was Tyche, who possessed symbols of abundance. Her walled crown represented cities, each with its own Tyche. [Larousse, 164] One of her oldest images comes from Smyrna, where she holds the Horn of Amalthea, which produced endless food and drink. [Pausanias, IV, xxx; Apollodorus, II, 424] Agathe Tyche (“kind fortune”) appears as half snake, half woman, with poppies and a basket of grain. She is linked to the birth goddess Eileithyia, a very old goddess named in a Linear B tablet at Knossos. [Harrison, 278, 284; Gimbutas, Liv G, 139] The cave of Eileithyia (near Amnisos, Crete) has been a

sanctuary since neolithic times. Eileithyia herself had fateful powers: if the torch she carried pointed down, it portended a delayed birth, even death. [Johnson, Buffy, 147] In carrying a torch, Eileithyia resembled Demeter and Hecate, and, like Klotho, she was also pictured in the act of spinning.

Public ritual continued to honor the Moirae on occasions that manifested their power most visibly: the passages of birth, initiation, marriage, and death. Greek brides offered locks of their hair to the Fates and to Artemis. (These goddesses were often worshipped together, as the Roman *fatae* were with Diana.) When Atropos severed the life cord, kinswomen mourned the dead, chanting the Moiralogia (“words of the Fates”) to guide their journey to the underworld. Modern Greek women still sing these funeral incantations.