Delphic Oracles as Oral Performances: Authenticity and Historical Evidence

While no one would dispute that Delphi was the premier oracular site in archaic and classical Greece, as Croesus’ test of the oracles in Herodotus’ Histories implies, there remains among historians and literary scholars a certain unease about how to interpret the corpus of Delphic oracles. The modern historian who cannot account for the miraculous elements in Delphic stories often falls back on notions of political manipulation and blind faith. Or he simply dismisses these stories because they seem to lack any documentary evidence, that is, they appear as unreliable evidence for the dates and details of particular consultations and the social crises these consultations were meant to address. To the literary historian, Delphic tales appear to fall into the amorphous category of folklore, or, if an oracle is in hexameter, it appears to be a paltry descendent of Homer. And, whether the oracle is in verse or not, these tales, to the extent they are regarded as monotonous and repetitive moralizing, are not considered a genre, a status which might compel inquiry, and appear unworthy of literary exegesis. Thus, the workings of Delphi, its function and role in the political and religious lives of individuals and cities, remain unexplored because oracular tales have slipped through the nets of the historian and literary scholar alike.

How to evaluate Delphic oracles is a question particularly acute for historians because Delphic narratives are often the only surviving literary accounts of important historical events, such as colonization or tyranny. Relying on notions of positivism, probability grounded in common sense, the pervasive tactic among historians has been to distinguish genuine or authentic oracles from

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forgeries, where authenticity implies that it is a fact that there was a consultation of the Delphic oracle, that a response was given and that the account of these events reports the occasion of the consultation and the response verbatim. The prominence of the question of authenticity in part derives from the two collections of oracles which are organized around it.

In the collection of Parke and Wormell,1 when the Spartans ask Delphi if they will be able to conquer Arcadia, for example, the oracle responds that they will measure out the Tegean plain in fetters.2 When the Spartans attack Tegea, believing that they will conquer and place their enemies in fetters, they lose the battle and they disguise themselves to measure out the Tegean plain in fetters. Parke and Wormell comment, “The Pythia’s words were a reasonable comment on Spartan aspirations: they might be expected to conquer, not the whole of Arcadia, but their northernmost neighbor, Tegea, and the flat plain in which it stood. Happily for the Pythia her metaphorical language could lend itself to other interpretations ...”3 Parke and Wormell assume that the oracle could not have predicted the future and that the oracle’s metaphorical language, which they believe is a good indicator that an oracle contains the ipsissima verba of the Pythia, served to disguise Delphi’s ineptitude and hence its institutional duplicity. For this reason, and because the oracle “was delivered under approximately the circumstance which Herodotus records,” it is authentic.4 In Parke and Wormell’s work, the question of authenticity, then, hinges upon two interrelated criteria. Can they sufficiently remove all traces of supernatural elements, so that they can interpret that tale as a faithful recording of events? Are the reported words of the Pythia her ipsissima verba? If both of these conditions are met, the oracle is considered authentic, i.e. there was a consultation at the date stated, a response was given, the report of the occasion and the response is accurate and we can interpret what the oracle really meant better than its original recipients.5

1. Parke and Wormell 1956. Oracles are collected and numbered in volume II. Hereafter I will refer to Delphic oracles as “PW #” in order to indicate their place in this collection. Where there is more than one source, I will supply the source that Parke and Wormell quote at length. All translations of oracles and other Greek passages are mine, unless otherwise indicated. For other variants of a particular oracle, Parke and Wormell must be consulted. Fontenrose’s 1978 collection of oracles contains additional citations as well as brief summaries of Delphic oracles in English. Those oracles which are in hexameter verse have been collected in Andersen 1987. Since this collection does not contain all Delphic oracles, I have not included it in the following discussion of authenticity.

2. PW 31 = Hdt. 1.66.
5. Parke and Wormell divide the corpus of Delphic oracles into nine chronological periods. The oracles judged authentic are placed in the period of the event they describe. For example, the oracle above is placed in the second period, which covers events from the end of the First Sacred War to the burning of the temple in 548 B.C.E. Oracles judged not authentic are placed in the period of the source where they are found. For example, one oracle from Plutarch’s Life of Solon which is judged authentic is placed in the first period, that is, when Solon lived (PW 15 = Plut. Sol. 14.6). Another
Such a notion of authenticity amounts to little more than a subjective notion of plausibility.6

Joseph Fontenrose,7 who collected Delphic oracles about two decades after Parke and Wormell and attempted to find a more objective means of assessing their authenticity,8 divided the Delphic corpus into four categories.9 The “historical” category contains any oracle which falls within the lifetime of the writer who records it, although contemporaneity is not a guarantee of authenticity. Both “legendary” oracles which refer to events “in the dim past, sometime before the eighth century” and “fictional” oracles found in dramatists and poets tend not to be authentic. Roughly half of all Delphic oracles are “quasi-historical” oracles. Allegedly spoken in historical times, these oracles were recorded by authors who lived after the response was issued. Providing objective criteria for determining their authenticity is one of Fontenrose’s main goals, which he accomplishes by comparing them to the historical responses. To the degree that quasi-historical oracles are concerned with the same sort of questions and use similar phrases as the oracles in the historical category, they are judged authentic. This procedure, however, ignores the fact that nearly half the historical oracles date from the middle of the third century or later and are recorded on stone, and

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oracle from this same text, which is judged not authentic, is placed in the sixth period (373–300), because Parke and Wormell think the story was invented before 300 B.C.E. (PW 326 = Plut. Sol. 9.1). Finally, if there were an oracle judged not authentic in Plutarch’s text which could not be attributed to an earlier source, it would be placed in the ninth period when Plutarch lived.

6. Parke and Wormell’s interpretation of Herodotus’ account of an oracle advising the Spartans to bring back the bones of Orestes illustrates that these criteria for assessing authenticity are consistent throughout their collection. Parke and Wormell 1956: I 96 claim that this oracle is authentic because it contains the exact words of the Pythia and because Herodotus’ account is factual. “Some bones of a prehistoric monster were found in the plain of Tegea in the neighborhood of a smithy, and thus provided the colossal relics required, and suggested the involved interpretation of the oracle. The news of the finding and the loss of this precious talisman will have had a weakening effect on Tegean morale.”

7. Fontenrose 1978: 12 writes that “so far judgements about the authenticity of responses have generally been subjective and tentative. . . . It is plain therefore that a more objective criterion should be found.”

8. Fontenrose’s ideas have less in common with Parke and Wormell’s than with Roland Crahay’s work on Herodotus, which Fontenrose follows insofar as he dismisses most verse oracles as fictitious. Crahay 1955: 295–304 posits that there are two distinct groups of oracles in Herodotus: oracles in prose summaries dealing with religious matters which Herodotus learned from priests at Delphi and hexameter oracles dealing with political matters which Herodotus gathered from the romantic biographies of eastern monarchs. The oracles in the first group were issued from Delphi and hence are authentic, while those in the second group are completely fictitious. For Crahay, then, authentic oracles are those which have issued from Delphi, betray no traces of poetic elaboration, and are concerned with (only) religious matters.

9. While Fontenrose’s work has contributed enormously to our knowledge of Delphi, his division of Delphic oracles into these categories has been variously received. Those who praise Fontenrose’s “precise historical and philological methodology” with its “cold hard realism” include Mikelson 1980/1981: 179–80 (quoted here) and Dietrich 1980: 238–39. Those who criticize the conclusions that Fontenrose draws from his classifications of oracles include Robertson 1982 and Brenk 1980. Brenk’s criticisms, I have discovered, overlap with those registered here.
thus necessarily reflect later inscrptional practices. If these "historical" oracles, because of their formulaic language, correspond to our notions of a "factual" account, they need not represent the only authentic voice of the oracle, which Fontenrose takes to be "what the Pythia really said." Moreover, these inscriptions may not record exactly what happened, as he assumes they do. Thus, for all the seeming precision of Fontenrose's work, his criteria for judging authenticity are no different from those of Parke and Wormell. If Fontenrose believes that a recorded oracle reports the ipsissima verba of the Pythia and that its framing story accurately records a consultation and its circumstances, he considers the oracle authentic.

Most Delphic oracles, particularly those in Herodotus, Plutarch, and Pausanias, where we find the majority of them, are embedded in framing narratives with an almost invariable plot structure—crisis, consultation, interpretation, action, confirmation or refutation of interpretation made evident in the oracle's fulfillment. Historians in their quest to distinguish the authentic oracles from others ignore two areas of inquiry that the repetitiveness of this narrative encourages us to consider. First, historians do not question how and why so many Delphic narratives share this same syncopated plot structure. The repetitiveness of this pattern, however, indicates that a process of "structuration" has taken place during which all these tales have conformed to this narrative structure. According to oral historian Jan Vansina, this process is a result of oral transmission and is conducted in the service of creating memorable stories that reflect the world view.

10. For example, since only four historical oracles judged authentic are in verse, verse oracles are suspect in Fontenrose's view and only three quasi-historical oracles in verse are judged authentic; see Fontenrose 1978: chapter six. Yet, when one considers the use of the hexameter in archaic Greece, Fontenrose's suspicions seem misplaced. The hexameter is not only the meter of epic poetry; it is used extensively in archaic Greece in philosophical tracts (Parmenides and Xenophases), in wisdom poetry (Hesiod), in religious prayers (Homeric Hymns), in scientific works (Hesiod's Astronomia) and in epitaphs. In the context of archaic Greece, therefore, there is no reason to doubt the use of hexameter verse at Delphi, particularly during the seventh through sixth centuries. To dismiss verse oracles on general grounds is to ignore Plutarch's extended discussion on the Pythias' use of verse in Delphi's early history (On the Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse).

11. Inscriptional oracles often contain the formulaic phrase, "it is better and wise to X" followed by detailed instructions. (See, for example, PW 164, 165, 260, 347, 348, 349, 426, 427.) However, there is no reason to assume, as Fontenrose does, that the Pythia only approves or disapproves such detailed plans, and then to move from this assumption to the dismissal of most of the Pythia's utterances recorded in the literary sources. Inscriptional evidence from the fourth century or later may reflect one tendency in consultations—the request for the Pythia to approve or disapprove a project. We may imagine that the details contained in an inscription have been worked out by the city-state either before or after a consultation, and that this description of details did not depend on the particular words of approval the Pythia used, only the fact of her approval. In this sense, inscriptional evidence may give us less information about what happened during a consultation than literary evidence. An inscription may contain an "oracle" which bears little relation to the ipsissima verba of the Pythia, in part because the purpose of such inscriptions may have been to authenticate the details of a decision. In this context, the exact words of the Pythia may not appear important; see Thomas 1989.
of their tellers. Second, modern historians do not as a rule examine whether this world view embraced a notion of truth that corresponds with their own. Of the six hundred or so oracles attributed to Delphi, all are fulfilled, that is, none are represented as forgeries or as inaccurate predictions, a fact which the fixity of this narrative pattern underscores. This observation suggests that these tales were religious testimonia, and insofar as these tales reiterated the efficacy of Apollo’s prophecies, they were “true” in the minds of the believers who promulgated them.

It will be my argument, therefore, that our written record of Delphic oracles stands at the end of a long process of oral performances, like the Homeric poems, and that consequently, Delphic oracles, like the Homeric poems, are not amenable to analyses which seek to determine their authenticity in the manner of Parke and Wormell and Fontenrose. Just as the recognition that the Homeric poems were orally composed has suggested a variety of new questions, tools and techniques for the interpretation of these works, an analysis of the oral dimensions of the Delphic tradition will suggest how oracles and oracular tales may or may not be fruitfully analyzed by modern scholars. Moreover, the oral circulation of oracles implies that the raw material for these stories originated in the communities that circulated them, and these communities were communities of believers. Thus, the status of these tales as products of oral transmission demands that we consider seriously the religious beliefs that informed their transmission and determined the inclusion, omission or “fabrication” of details.

ORALITY, AUTHENTICITY AND AUTHORSHIP

With a written document, authenticity hinges upon the notion of authorship. If Aeschylus composed Prometheus Bound, it is an authentic Aeschylean tragedy. If someone else composed this play, regardless of how successfully the forger replicates Aeschylus’ style, the play is not authentic. In oral traditions, the question of authenticity must be posed differently since there is no one author, but rather a series of performers. In the same way that it is not possible to recover the “original” songs of Homer (or “Homer”), it is not possible to recover the Pythias’ original words, their ipsissima verba. No oracle in the Delphic tradition can be proven to be such. Nor can oracles which originated from the Pythias in Delphi be easily distinguished from those which did not. If an oracle is attributed to Delphi, how could we know for certain that it is not the product of a chresmologos, when we consider the process of oral transmission? Therefore, the question of

12. “Sequential order is imposed and the ordering made easier to remember by patterning successive accounts in one of the basic ways in which the mind patterns—by oppositions, or by strong sequential association. . . . Finally there is the known tendency of the mind in memory to construct a coherent discourse. This leads to structuring the same topics over and over again so that they become more meaningful in terms of world view of the culture in question.” On the process of structuration in oral traditions, see Vansina 1985: 171 (quoted above) with 71–79 and 165–73. See Peradotto 1974: 822–25 for an analysis of the narrative patterns of oracular tales.
authenticity cannot hinge upon the notion of authorship as defined in written traditions. Since oracles were accepted (or rejected), interpreted (and during this process re-worded), remembered and recited by a community of believers, their author, properly speaking, was the community itself, not the Pythia, nor the author who recorded them in writing. Thus, a recognition of the oral transmission of oracles requires us to revise our notions of authenticity and authorship, two interrelated concepts.

While many of Fontenrose’s conclusions may be debated, many of his observations can not. Fontenrose has carefully demonstrated that only a small percentage of Delphic oracles, the “historical” ones, were recorded in writing within a generation of their utterance at Delphi. All of the “quasi-historical” oracles, the far larger group, survived for at least a generation in collective memory before being recorded. This suggests that the primary means of transmission of Delphic oracles was word of mouth, and that the Delphic tradition was an oral one. The term oral tradition need not refer only to epic, the most familiar example of oral traditions in classical scholarship. An oral tradition may embrace any variety of genres, whether prose or poetry, such as religious liturgy, folklore, proverbs, historical gossip, personal reminiscences, kinship group reminiscences, genealogies or stories of origins. Vansina writes, “The term ‘oral tradition’ applies both to a process and its products. The products are oral messages based on previous oral messages, at least a generation old. The process is the transmission of such messages by word of mouth over time until the disappearance of the message. Hence any given oral tradition is but a rendering at one moment, an element in a process of oral development that began with the original communication.”

Therefore, the Delphic tradition was an oral tradition and our corpus of Delphic oracles is “oral-derived,” that is, the corpus has reached us in written form, but it reveals oral traditional compositional practices.

There are two definable moments in the oral transmission of Delphic oracles, the first at Delphi and second in cities. Both stages are poorly documented because, as stated above, oracular tales are quite abbreviated and follow a stereotypical plot which omits details that allow us to delineate with precision how oracles circulated. During the first stage at Delphi, the Pythia pronounced the oracle, whether in verse or prose, to the client. It may be that bards outside the temple converted the Pythia’s utterances into verse, especially in the later stages of

13. Because Fontenrose so thoroughly and carefully documents the processes of oracular transmission which are consistent with oral practices, his work has encouraged me to consider these processes in light of Homeric and other scholarship on oral traditions.


15. On the term “oral-derived,” see Foley 1990. The following works on oral traditions have influenced my treatment of the Delphic tradition: Finnegan 1970 and 1988; Portelli 1981; Tonkin 1992. Hefferman’s discussion (1988) of saints’ biographies in the Middle Ages has provided me with a model for understanding how religious beliefs influenced the oral transmission of saints’ biographies. The influence of his work (especially chapters 1 and 2) on this analysis is great. I have shamelessly borrowed many felicitous phrases and insights from his work.
Delphi’s history, which would suggest the fluidity inherent in this tradition. However, there is no need to assume the existence of such bards to explain verse oracles. Plutarch and his contemporaries clearly attributed versified oracles both to the skills of the early Pythias and the predilections of the times in which they lived. Moreover, there is no evidence that suggests writing was used during the divinatory consultation or that anyone other than the Pythia uttered the oracle to the client. Thus, the consultation was the first oral performance of the oracle and the Pythias stand as fontes et origines of the Delphic tradition.

There is little evidence that writing was used at Delphi to record responses. The famous “wooden wall” oracle is one such instance: the Athenian ambassadors have the oracle written down for them. When Croesus tests various oracle shrines, he commands his servants to write down the responses they receive. Apart from these two instances of writing at Delphi for the recording of responses, evidence is wanting. However, there may have been cause to use writing at this stage in the transmission of oracles from Delphi to city. Gregory Nagy has recently outlined the conditions for a singer’s authority to recompose in performance an earlier oral message. Most oral traditions have an explicit “myth” that a song does not change despite the inevitable changes any oral performance entails, or traditions understand oral performances as re-enactments of a mythical first bard’s performance and thus identical to it. Yet, this is necessarily not the case, regardless of a tradition’s understanding of itself, because all performances are recompositions. The rhetoric that singers have about the integrity and fidelity of their songs, however, suggests that “authority in performance is key to the very concept of authorship.” That is, a singer must be authorized by his audience “who are presumed to be authoritative members of the song culture.” Authorized speakers, who may be the intended audience of the message or speakers authorized by an audience, are definitional “true performers.” As we will see, the audience of oracles, whether at Delphi or in cities, are indeed the true performers or

16. Macleod 1961. See also Plutarch, who explains the use of verse during Delphi’s early history in just these terms (Plut. Mor. 397b–c; 405e–407c).
17. It is now the consensus that the Pythia, not her attendant priests, issued Delphic oracles, on which see Maurizio 1995.
18. This is not to say that oracles, whether Delphic or otherwise, were never recorded in writing. We have evidence from Aristophanes, for example, that chresmologoi had written collections of oracles. Clearly writing was sometimes used in the transmission of oracles, though in a limited way; see Fontenrose 1978: 145–65. Such limited use of writing, however, does not significantly alter the following delineation of the oral transmission of oracles.
19. Hdt. 7.142.
21. Nagy 1996. The following is a brief synopsis of Nagy’s first chapter, which contains many observations relevant here.
composers of oracles insofar as they confer authority on an oracle-performer by accepting his oracle, sometimes even rewording it, during performance.

Unauthorized speakers or intermediaries, on the other hand, are enjoined or believed to repeat without change a song they have heard, or, more dramatically, their performance is rejected by an audience who does not grant them authority. Within the Delphic tradition, ambassadors who go to Delphi on behalf of cities may not have been authorized by their audience to be composers/performers of Delphic oracles, or so a passage from Theognis that records prohibitions against altering the oracles one hears at Delphi suggests.26

It is necessary for the man who is a theoros,27 Kyrnos, to be straighter than a carpenter’s pin or rule or square, a man for whom the prophesying priestess of the god at Pytho pours forth her holy voice from the rich adyton. For neither adding anything would you find a cure, nor subtracting anything would you avoid erring in the eyes of the gods.

In the last couplet, Theognis tells the theoros how to report the oracular response to the city on whose behalf he has traveled to Delphi. The addition (προστίθημι) against which Theognis advises is editorial: it is used for adding to a story so as to improve it,28 or for adding articles to statements or documents. In Thucydides, the pact between the Athenians and Spartans concludes with this clause, “If it seems appropriate to the Lacedaemonians and the Athenians to either add or subtract anything that seems fitting, it must be in the spirit of the oath according to both parties.” Here, “to add” (προστίθημι) is paired with “to subtract” (ἀφαρέω) as in Theognis.29 Thus, Theognis prescribes that the theoros neither add nor subtract words, but retain the perfection of the divine utterance. While ambassadors no doubt might have changed the wording of oracles when they reported them to their cities, they were not authorized to do so by their audiences. If this is correct, it may be that writing was sometimes used at this point in the transmission of oracles from Delphi to city.30 However, we must, as Nagy advises, be suspicious.

26. Τόρνου καὶ στάθμης καὶ γνώμονος ἄνδρα θεωρῶν / εὐθύτερον χρῆ (ἐ)μεν, Κύρνε, φυλασσόμενον, / ὅτι κευ Πυθώνι θεοῦ χρήσασα τερεια/ὑμην σημείη πίνονος ἐξ ἄδυτου· / οὐτέ τι γὰρ προσθέεις οὐδέν κ’ ἐτι φάρμακον εὗροις, / οὐδ’ ἄφελων πρὸς θεῶν ἀμπλακήν προφυγός (Theognis 805–10).


28. τὸ δὲ θαυμαστὸν ἡδῷ σημεῖον δὲ πάντες γὰρ προστίθεντες ἀπαγγέλλουσιν ως χαριζόμενοι. “The astounding is pleasing and here is sign of this: everyone telling a tale adds something in order that he might please [his listeners]” (Arist. Poetics 1460a18).

29. Thuc. 5.23: ἦν δὲ τι δοξὴ Λακεδαιμονίων καὶ Αἰθηναίων προσθεναι καὶ ἄφελεν περὶ τῆς ξυμμαχίας, ὥσ’ ἂν δοξὴ, εὐφρονον ἀμφιτέρους εἶναι. See LSJ s.v. προστίθημι A. III. See also Isoc. 12.264 and Arist. EN 1106b11, Arist. APo. 91b27 and Pl. Cra. 432a, where προστίθημι is paired with ἀφαρέω.

30. One might question whether writing was understood to be a better preserver of oral messages than memory at this time; see Thomas 1989.
of injunctions to oral performers, such as that of Theognis, not to change the wording of their compositions, because all performances are recompositions. Nonetheless, from Theognis' comments and Croesus' injunction to his servants to write the oracle they receive, we can deduce that there may have been some concern that ambassadors not change the Pythia's words when carrying an oracle to the city that sought it and that ambassadors were not granted an authoritative status by their audience.

In what contexts and how were oracles reported in the cities that sought them? How did the audience of an oracular performance confer or deny the authority of ambassadors as oracle-performers when they returned to their cities? How does this exchange between performer and audience relate to the question of authenticity? One paradigmatic story in Herodotus provides a glimpse at this stage in the oral transmission of oracles: the account of the "wooden wall" oracle. This story, unique for the amount of details it contains about the oral transmission of oracles, begins in Delphi. There, the Athenian ambassadors refuse to accept the first oracle the Pythia gives them when they ask whether the Athenians should remain in Athens or leave in the face of an inevitable Persian invasion. Horrified by the images the Pythia paints of Athens' temples sweating and bleeding, and equally distraught over her advice that they flee to the ends of the earth, the Athenian ambassadors, under the advice of some Delphians, supplicate her for another oracle. Without accepting that Herodotus' account corresponds exactly to what happened that day, it must nonetheless have been plausible to his listeners. This suggests that even in a ritual context such as Delphi, the audience of any oracle could exert considerable influence on a performer, and as in this instance reject her performance and thereby refuse to confer authority on her. Thus, any performance of an oracle had in a sense two authors, as Nagy states, the performer and the audience, who together could comment on and determine any one oracle's form and meaning.

After the Athenian ambassadors accept the Pythia's second pronouncement, the "wooden wall" oracle, they return to Athens and "re-perform" this oracle before the Athenian assembly, where its meaning is debated by members of the assembly, chresmologoi and most notably Themistocles, who convinces the Athenians that the oracle's "wooden wall" refers not to a palisade around the Acropolis, but to ships which the Athenians should build. Themistocles urges the Athenians to adopt an offensive posture against the Persians and leave their land, thereby confirming the Pythia's advice in the first oracle (an observation Herodotus does not make). Thus, the Athenian assembly, unlike the ambassadors at Delphi, authorizes this oracular performance by accepting the oracle and by lending it credibility through their contested interpretation of it. The Athenian ambassadors are not its exegetes or authors. Nor even are the chresmologoi who do not agree with Themistocles' interpretation. Rather the community is a collection of experts who, in some crucial sense, author this oracle and in so doing deem it authentic—that is, they accept it as a divine utterance with predictive value, and
Moreover, men means Dorian Thucydides' Pythia pedigree during plague during oracles of circumstances. Audience contested said should some the status to these tradition in many oracles, Delphic account. Again, this is not to say that Herodotus' account records exactly what happened. We may assume that when Herodotus records this tale he is equally bound to the expectations and thus the authority of his audience, who have been bandying about this oracular tale of national importance for several decades before he writes his account. Herodotus, no doubt, must adhere to the expectations of his audience in part by supplying the usual oracular plot. In so doing, he renews the Delphic tradition even as his tale is subsumed by it. We can assume that his account, like the many oral versions that preceded it, must be authorized by the community. For these reasons, we can accept this written version as a reasonable description of this oracular performance and accept its oracle as authentic. This does not imply that the oracle has not been continually revised as the story of its pronouncement and fulfillment—which encapsulated Athens' collective fate—was constantly retold. Moreover, in light of this process of oral transmission in which the national and religious beliefs of the community no doubt influenced how the tale was shaped during oral transmission, we must be skeptical about whether Herodotus' account can be mined for historical data about the exact date of the consultation or the ipsissima verba of the Pythia, for example. Nonetheless, because the Athenian audience has accepted this prediction and enshrined it among Delphi's efficacious oracles, they have lent it credibility and hence deemed it authentic, in contrast to the Athenian ambassadors who refused the first oracle they received from the Pythia and hence undermined its claim to be a member of the Delphic tradition.

Other accounts of the oral transmission of non-Delphic oracles, such as Thucydides' account of the "plague" oracle, illustrate that the community is the author of oracles and that they confer authenticity upon oracles—here their status as divine and predictive utterances, though not necessarily their Delphic pedigree—during oracular performances. The better attested Delphic oracles should be considered in light of these less specific oracular utterances, always in circulation and always ready to be applied to any occasion, in part because some oracles attributed to Delphi are also attributed to other sources—which suggests the fluidity between the Delphic and non-Delphic oracles. When the plague strikes Athens during the beginning of the Peloponnesian war, several old men in the marketplace recall an oracle they believe is relevant to the present circumstances. Among those present, some say that the oracle was "with the Dorian war, there will come a plague (loimos)," while others argue that the oracle said "with the Dorian war, there will be famine (limos)." Those who argue that the

31. On the interplay between Delphic and non-Delphic oracles, see Fontenrose 1978: 88–117.
oracle predicted a plague would accompany a Dorian war win the day because, as Thucydides says, “people construct a memory to fit the things they endure.” He then conjectures that if another war with the DORians were to cause a famine, the oracle would be remembered so as to fit this circumstance. Thucydides implies that people will recompose oracles during the course of an oracular performance, something which is only possible in an oral tradition. If the plague oracle were recorded in writing, there would be no room to perform, interpret and recompose this oracle. His shrewd observation about how people remember oracles also implies that the Athenian community accepts and thereby authorizes this anonymous oracle so that it becomes part of its collective understanding of their present plight. Thus, they are its authors and in their understanding, if not Thucydides’, it is authentic.

This vignette also suggests the fluidity between past, present and future. Past utterances become understood in the present because they are reconstructed through the present circumstances. Thus, oracular performances replicate the permeability between different times, as oracles themselves as prophetic utterances do, while Thucydides’ text, like Herodotus’, fossilizes both the relationship between past and present and the fluidity that attended any oracular performance. Euripides makes several of the same points regarding oracles and their interpretation, albeit in a comic fashion. In his Ion, after Xuthus receives an oracle telling him that the first person he meets will be his son, he leaves Apollo’s temple and sees Apollo’s servant Ion. At first Ion is suspicious of Xuthus’ claims on him, but upon hearing the oracle begins to accept that he must indeed be Xuthus’ long lost child. What follows is a comic and fallacious reconstruction of past events by Xuthus and Ion as they try to explain how Ion might have been conceived and how he might have become a servant of Apollo. While Ion and Xuthus do not change the wording of Apollo’s oracle as do Thucydides’ Athenians in the marketplace, we nonetheless can observe how the oracle’s acceptance and interpretation depends upon Ion’s belief that it is indeed an oracle of Apollo and how oracular performances (here Xuthus’) are authenticated by their audience who in the process of interpretation become their authors.

That Euripides’ audience knows that Xuthus and Ion are completely mistaken in their reconstruction of their past and that Euripides, like Thucydides, unmasksthe foibles of oracular performances does not detract from the insights into oracular interpretation that both authors supply. Nor does it imply that every Athenian or every Greek was aware of mechanisms by which oracles were interpreted or authenticated, or with such awareness were dismissive of oracular utterances. Indeed, at the ending of Euripides’ play, Ion is prohibited from questioning Apollo about the truthfulness of this oracle. Perhaps, Xuthus is indeed Ion’s father, if we understand that the word father can refer to a social

32. Thuc. 2.54: οι ἄνθρωποι πρὸς ἡ ἐπισκοπὴν τὴν μνήμην ἐποιοῦντο.
fact (i.e., guardianship or adoption) as well as to a biological one. Since these are the very terms which the play explores on both an individual and a national level, we should hesitate to conclude that the play is critical of Delphi as an institution. It may be rather that the play is critical of the human ability to understand oracles, but not of their intrinsic status as divine utterances.

Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* makes the same point, particularly if we accept Frederick Ahl’s radical reading, which echoes the work of critics outside the field of classics. Ahl argues that Oedipus does not fully establish that he has killed Laius and that he is Laius’ son. Nor is it clear, according to Ahl, that Jocasta’s suicide requires such an interpretation of events. If Ahl and others are correct in their reading of this play, and Oedipus has assumed but not proven that he is the son of Jocasta and Laius, then Sophocles, more forcibly than Euripides and even Thucydides, exposes the terrible risks of oracular interpretation. Regardless of whether we accept Ahl’s interpretation of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the play illustrates that Oedipus’ recollection and interpretation of the oracle he once received are the very processes that make him the oracle’s author: if he did not recall the oracle, it would not enter collective consciousness and become part of the Delphic tradition. It is that which makes such an oracle authentic, an accurate prediction from Delphi. Such oracular interpretation is conducted only by the pious for whom such a process holds meaning. Moreover, Oedipus’ interpretation, however we understand it, is predicated on and compels belief, despite or perhaps because of Oedipus and Jocasta’s questioning of the validity of prophecy in the play’s center. Similarly, at the center of every oracular tale, when an oracle, because of its ambiguity, remains indecipherable, a barely articulated question about the efficacy of Apollo’s oracle is raised. “How might this oracular utterance correspond to a future reality” is not far from “does this oracular utterance have any meaning,” even if the second question remains implicit and is never as fully articulated as it is in Sophocles’ play. The tale’s resolution—that is, the oracle’s fulfillment—answers both questions. Thus, the *Oedipus Tyrannus* confirms that interpreters of oracles, even if they question an oracle and its application, are believers, and that oracular narratives are stories of a believing community.

The religious dimension of the oral transmission of oracles is nowhere more evident than in an inscription from Delphi, dated to no later than the middle of the third century and possibly as early as the middle of the fourth. The first twelve or so hexameter verses of this inscription were found on a small piece of marble near the treasury-house of Athens in Delphi. Six more half-verses were found in the western peribolos of the temenos. This inscription most nearly approximates the miracle stories set up at the entrance to the Asclepian sanctuary at Epidauros.

34. Dougherty 1996.
36. Text from Pomtow 1918: 46–47 (translation mine). See also Weinreich 1925; PW 334 = *Delph*. 3 (1), 500 ll. 1–2; Fontenrose 1978: 19.
which suggests that all oracular tales, including those in literary works, belong to a tradition of miracle stories, even if this aspect of Delphic tales is usually less pronounced than in this instance. The inscription reads:

... Phoibos gave [me] offspring by means of his oracles,
having heard my prayer, and he ordered [me] to make a hair-offering.
In the eleventh month a healthy girl was born,
Unblemished she had hair which went all the way to her eyes,
In her first year, her hair grew in length to her chest.
When my wife was pregnant, she was not ill as before,
Nor did she endure terrible child-bearing pains
Because of the counsels of child-rearing Loxias and the powerful Moirai.
And on account of the cunning of Phoibos, she named her offspring
Delphis, because of the oracles and in memory of Delphi.
Then in the fourth year...

... I write in memory of my daughter.

Apollo seems to have predicted that this man and his wife would beget children and to have instructed the man to offer the hair of the newborn. As it appears from line six, his wife had been ill previously, perhaps during childbirth. It is not clear if his wife’s pregnancy was thought to have lasted eleven months or if eleven months have passed since his initial visit to Delphi. In either case, his wife gave birth to a healthy girl and thereby the oracle (or advice) he received from Delphi was fulfilled. If it had not been, he would not have carved this stone. Only oracles that are imagined to have predicted the future accurately or those which can explain the present in terms of the past have any meaning for the believer. Consequently, it is only in the context of belief in divine prognostication that oracles can be judged authentic and that oracular stories filled with miracles, such as this one, are transmitted.

The authenticity of this oracle (its status as a true prediction) in part rests on the child’s hair which grows miraculously during her first year of life. This appears to be a sign indicating that Apollo’s demand of a hair-offering was prophetic. Or at least this seems to be the interpretation of this tale’s author—one which locates this oracle within the Delphic tradition of ambiguous oracles. Such ambiguities, which in most oracles rest in tropes such as metaphor and homonyms, are not mere rhetorical adornments. Rather their presence defines an oracle as a divine utterance filled with so much meaning that its correct interpretation may elude its human interpreters. By finding an ambiguity of sorts in Apollo’s words, this new story reclaims a well-known feature of oracular tales. Such repetitiveness coupled with this tale’s “simple” language indicates that the aesthetic dimensions
of recording oracles are less important than the affirmation of the divine presence in human affairs. This affirmation is the goal of much religious testimony: formulaic language and repetitiveness are means to accomplish it. Indeed, a demonstration of an oracle’s veracity accomplished through its conformity to a typical Delphic plot and the use of metaphor compel the audience to wonder at the oracle’s status as divine utterance. Ironically, it is precisely these traits that cause modern and even some ancient critics to become skeptical of an oracle’s authenticity or dismissive of its literary value.

The tract “Exposure of the Cheats” by Oenomaus, a Cynic philosopher from Gadara who lived during the last years of Hadrian’s reign, illustrates that disbelief thwarts the acceptance, interpretation, and authentication of oracles and in effect marks the end of a tradition such as the Delphic one which depends upon belief for its promulgation. The bias of this tract, as revealed by its title and its date, suggests that it is of an era when oracular practices had ceased to be meaningful for all Greeks in the way they had been in the Greek world Herodotus describes. While it is questionable to what degree practices at Claros can be used to determine how Delphic oracles circulated several centuries earlier, Oenomaus’ experience at Apollo’s shrine in Claros may afford some measure of insight into how and why oracles might be rejected and thereby deemed not authentic. When Oenomaus asks the oracle about his commercial business ventures, he receives the following oracle in three trochaic verses: “In the land of Trachis lies the fair garden of Heracles containing all things in bloom for all to pick every day, and yet they are not diminished, but with rains continually their weight is replenished.” This oracle seems to promise rewards and pleasures despite, or perhaps after, “rough times” suggested by the name Trachis. When Oenomaus leaves the temple, he learns from the crowd outside that this oracle was given to anyone who had experienced any difficulty and had not yet found any pleasures or rewards. Oenomaus then criticizes another response he received—“from a widely whirling sling a man shoots stones and slays with his throws geese huge and fed on grass”—on the grounds that it is obscure, allegorical and presumably, like the previous one, could be given to any consultant to fit any particular situation. Oenomaus rejects his oracles because of the presence of metaphor that would allow them to be “re-used.” Thus Oenomaus, not unlike Parke and Wormell, views the presence of metaphorical language as an indication of institutional duplicity. Yet, the repetitiveness of this device in the former oracular story is precisely what secured its status as a member of the Delphic tradition.

38. In Ifa divination, a similar procedure is followed. The diviner has a fixed set of prophetic verses which he dispenses to his clients. It is up to the client to interpret the verse and decide on its applicability to his present situation as well as its meaning. Bascom 1969.
39. See Parke and Wormell’s comments on the Spartan oracle concerning Tegea, discussed above.
To conclude, an oracle’s audience are its authors insofar as they confer authority on its performer, whether at Delphi or in a city. Their acceptance of an oracle, evident in their interpretation during a performance, is the touchstone by which an oracle is deemed authentic, an accurate prediction from Delphi. Once judged authentic, an oracle can become a *bona fide* member of the Delphic tradition. This process of authentication may take several forms. Ambassadors may return from Delphi with an oracle whose wording appears not to change during performance, as is the case in the “wooden wall” oracle—though, as Nagy argues, we should be suspicious of such claims. In this instance, the audience vies to interpret the oracle, twisting the meaning of words so that they simultaneously sanction their own political goals and the oracle itself. Alternatively, an oracle may be recalled in light of present circumstances, as in the case of Thucydides’ “plague” oracle. During this performance, the audience again vies to interpret the oracle and in so doing changes its wording. Finally, an oracle may be rejected, by a skeptic such as Oenomaus or by the Athenian ambassadors, presumably believers in the possibility of divine prophecy. There are few examples of the refusal to confer authority on an oracle-performer and hence to render an oracle not authentic simply because oracles which have been rejected and deemed not authentic do not become part of the Delphic tradition. Every oracle in the corpus of Delphic oracles, then, has survived the scrutiny of its audiences at the first and second performance and of those who have orally circulated it. While we may prefer to trust written documents, in an oral culture, such eye-witnesses and the *viva voce* were no doubt a compelling witness to the truth. And such oral transmission, however fluid and “inaccurate” it may appear to us for remembering the past, was no doubt precisely what inspired credibility for the Greeks before writing was fully adopted. All of these stages leading up to the recording of the oracle in writing imply that the oracles attributed to Delphi were considered authentic by their tellers. Thus all the oracles attributed to Delphi are canonized by the tradition as authentic and thereafter become part of the appropriating force of the tradition.40

For these reasons, the modern preoccupation with judging an oracle authentic on the basis of whether a given account accurately records a consultation on a particular occasion, with the Pythia’s *ipissima verba* intact, misunderstands the method by which Delphic oracles and tales achieved their traditional status and what the authors of these tales believed about oracles. W. B. Yeats once described his town in western Ireland as a “community bound together by imaginative possessions.” To ignore how the tellers of oracular tales created the Delphic tradition and defined authenticity is to ignore the historic value of oracles and

40. Moreover, the written account of an oracle, particularly those of Herodotus, who was writing when Greece was still primarily an oral culture, must have accurately reflected the vitality and truth that tradition had bestowed upon an oracular tale so that the community could transfer its cherished beliefs from oral renderings to written word.
oracular tales as imaginative possessions which bound together their communities and thus reflected their collective mentality.\footnote{41}

**TRACES OF ORAL TRANSMISSION IN THE DELPHIC CORPUS**

A brief look at the corpus of Delphic oracles will allow us to trace the features of oracles that have facilitated the oral transmission of Delphic oracles and paradoxically have encouraged moderns to question their authenticity. If oracles were part of an on-going oral tradition, and were applied and re-applied to different situations, as Oenomaus’ story of Claros suggests, oracles, like Homeric formulae, must have been flexible. As we have seen, oracular flexibility was achieved in two ways. An oracle may have been altered during its performance by its teller or its audience. Or it may have been given to different consultants with little or no change in its form, particularly if it employed cultural commonplaces and metaphor. The written record of Delphic oracles gives evidence of both types.

The first oracle in Parke and Wormell’s collection, in addition to being an artful priamel, has a number of variants that can be understood as “traditional multiforms.”\footnote{42} That is, we can read them as evidence of how one oracle changed and was reapplied in different situations and hence as evidence of the flexibility of oracles.

- Pelasgian Argos has land better than any on earth,
- Thessaly has better horses, Lacedaemon better women.
- The men who drink the water of beautiful Arethusa are better,
- Though there are some better than they, namely those who dwell between Tiryns and Arcadia rich in flocks,
- The linen-wearing Argives, the goad of war.
- You men of Aigeum, however, are neither third nor fourth
- Nor twelfth. You are of no account and are not in the running.\footnote{43}

Mnaseas, who collected Delphic oracles, and whose version of this oracle is translated above, records that Ion listed the men of Aigeum in Achaea as the recipients of this oracle. Feeling pleased with themselves after having captured a penteconter of the Aetolians in a sea battle, they ask the Pythia who is better than they and receive this less than flattering response. Mnaseas also reports that some people, such as Callimachus, thought that the oracle was given to the

\footnote{41} Heffernan 1988: 59.

\footnote{42} Nagy 1996: 27 examines a variety of oral traditions and demonstrates that “textual variation is symptomatic of an ongoing oral tradition and that in fact an oral tradition stays alive through its variations and re-workings.” In an oral tradition, these re-workings are called multiforms in order to distinguish them from variations, understood as deviations from an original text.

Megarians and record line seven as, “You, men of Megara . . .”44 Dinias gives the context for the Megarian inquiry. They are haughty (φρονηματισθέντες).45 Not only does the addressee of this verse oracle change, but also the Thessalian horses become Thracian and Argos is excised in Dinias’ version.46 Just as the addressee of this oracle varies, so too does its source. Clement of Alexandria cites Theognis as its author, and in the Anthology it appears as an anonymous oracle.47 This suggests that there was a rather ill-defined boundary between Delphic and non-Delphic oracles. In its roughly twenty-five appearances, this oracle has different addressees, verses and authors, creating a dizzying array of possible occasions and events for its utterance and reflecting a vital and flexible oral tradition.

The second type of oracular flexibility is to be found in the cultural commonplaces and metaphors they contain. Two oracles which are completely unconnected but contain the same strange motif demonstrate how metaphors in Delphic oracles could encourage and create a flexible tradition. Demon, an Athidographer, reports that when the Boeotians had been expelled by the Thracians, they settled in what was later Thessaly.48 Since they were constantly at war with the Aeolians, they asked the Delphic oracle whether they should remain in Thessaly or move to another land. The oracle responded that white ravens would appear before they lost their land. Much like Croesus, who was told that he would rule Lydia until a mule sat on the Persian throne, the Boeotians believe that they may remain in Thessaly. However, after drunken young men chalk some ravens and inadvertently turn them white, the Aeolians expel the Boeotians. In other versions of this tale, the Boeotians are told to settle where they see white ravens. Once again, young children chalk the ravens, this time to the delight of the Boeotians, who settle in the land and call it “Ravenland.”49 In yet another story containing a Delphic oracle about white ravens, told in a series of hexameter oracles, a group of Magnesians dedicated to Delphi asks when they might return home.50 They are told that when white ravens appear, they must sacrifice at once and return. After seeing white ravens, they again ask the oracle if they should go back to their own country. The oracle, however, advises them to go elsewhere. A series of other inquiries follows, detailing their journey to their new home on the Maeander. Interestingly, this version of the “white raven” story has no mention of chalkings.

46. Oenom. apud Eus. P.E. 5.29.4 has οὖδακος for Ἀργός. Dinias has ἔπειτο Θρητίκοι κτλ.
47. Clem. Alex. Strom. 7, 901P; AP 14.73. This oracle appears in roughly twenty-five sources with various attributions, on which see Fontenrose 1978: 276–77, who provides the fullest documentation.
48. PW 309 = Demon FGrH 327 f 7 = Did in D. 11.65.
49. Photius, s.v. ἔς Κόρακας.
50. PW 378–82 = Inscr. Magn. No. 17. The most likely date for this inscription is 221/0, when the institution of the Leukophrenia was established as an agonistic festival; see Fontenrose 1978: 409. On this inscription, see also Pomtow 1896.
The motif of the white ravens in these tales is most likely related to the proverbial saying “go to the ravens.” Photius records that Aristotle wrote that during a plague many ravens flew overhead. Men captured and purified them, and then said to the plague “go to the ravens.” In a story of Aesop, a jackdaw who thinks well of himself attempts to fly among the ravens. When he realizes he is inferior to the ravens, he returns to the jackdaws, who, annoyed at his insouciance, tell him, “go to the ravens.” Both of these tales are aetiological and explain the origin of “go to the ravens.” The raven also has other associations: it is a messenger of Apollo, and apart from or because of its association with Apollo, it was thought to predict the weather. In addition, white ravens are proverbial for an unlikely, if not impossible, event. Both associations are apparent in these oracular tales, where the white ravens initially stand for a seemingly impossible event and their appearance predicts not the weather pattern, but human migration. Their epiphany, even if it is explained as the game of some drunkards, is miraculous because it materializes the condition of the oracle and, in doing so, makes manifest the powers of Apollo’s divine words. In this respect, the ravens are indeed messengers; they signal the efficacy of Apollo’s prophecies. Yet, considering all of these tales together, one senses a certain ambivalence about the white ravens. In some tales, they signal expulsion, in others, settlement. The humorous conditions which lead up to their metamorphosis from black to white suggest the fickleness of divinity. Thus, the white ravens are an apt emblem for the quixotic nature of exile, war, and colonization as well as the longed for, though tenuous, possibility of divine aid. Since these motifs are often metaphors and their kindred cousins, proverbs, both of which are culturally constructed and encapsulate the attitudes, beliefs, and social categories of their users, oracular images express the rhetorical and cultural ideas of their times.

The white raven motif, then, gives evidence of the flexibility of oracular images and of how oracles might have been recycled and used to describe a variety of situations. Its presence, like the slight variations in the first oracle of Parke and Wormell’s collection, registers these oracles’ oral transmission. Moreover, since

51. *LSJ* s.v. *xóραξ*. This phrase is particularly popular in Aristophanes (Vesp. 852, 982; Nu. 123, 133, 789; Pax 70, 500, 1221; *Eq.* 1314).
52. Both tales are reported in Photius, s.v. ἐκ *xóραξατά*.
53. Zenobius’ version of the Boeotians’ travail (s.v. ἐκ *xóραξατά*) is also aetiological and seems to be a crazy quilt of many earlier stories about the Boeotians and white ravens.
55. *AP* 11.417; Luc. *Epigr.* 43. Aristotle, however, discusses white ravens as though they existed in nature (Arist. *HA* 519a6).
56. On animal guides, see Pease 1917; Vian 1963; Fontenrose 1978: 73–74.
57. The literature on the social significance of metaphors is vast. I have found the following useful: Sapir and Crocker 1977; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Urton 1985; Fernandez 1991.
58. Davis 1987 advocates a similar stance with respect to pardon tales. She argues that these tales may be examined for the ways of thinking or habits of thought they reveal rather than for their veracity.
all oracular tales have changed through time because of their oral transmission, it is likely that almost none of the oracles attributed to Delphi is reported verbatim and that accounts of Delphic oracles do not accurately and in detail describe events as they happened. However, the process of "fictionalization," an inevitable by-product of oral transmission, does not mean that these oracles are not authentic. All of the oracles attributed to Delphi have survived several stages of authentication by the communities who interpreted and remembered them, and who therefore were their authors.

HERODOTUS

The oral transmission of Delphic oracles is further illustrated by Herodotus, who wrote at a time when Delphi was much visited and well known. Although Herodotus wrote his Histories, he lived in a primarily oral culture, performed his own Histories orally, and has a prose style that reflects oral modes of composition. The manner in which he preserves some oracles suggests the influence of such oral modes. When Herodotus records oracles which are firmly embedded in particular accounts, he is a recorder of a once oral oracular tradition. However, when Herodotus, rather than a character, introduces an oracle, Herodotus is an oracle-performer whose performances reiterate important features of the oral transmission of oracles noted above.

When Herodotus reports the maneuvers of the Greeks and the Persians before the naval engagement at Salamis, he introduces an oracle of Bacis into his account. When the Persians are blocking the west entrance to the channel between Salamis and the mainland at night so that the Greeks, upon awakening, will be forced to fight, Herodotus interrupts his narrative with the following remarks:

I have no reason to criticize oracles on the grounds that they are not true. Nor do I intend to try to cast aspersions on those that speak clearly, especially when I consider these events.

But when between the holy shore of Artemis and sea-girt Cynosura they forge a bridge with ships, and with raging hope attempt to conquer rich Athens, then holy Justice will defeat mighty Insolence, the son of Hubris, who is terribly eager, and thinks to rule all things. Bronze will mix with bronze, and with the blood of Ares the sea will become purple. Then the day of Hellas' freedom the wide-browed son of Cronus and the goddess Victory will welcome.

60. Hdt. 8.77.
61. Hdt. 8.77.
Following this quotation, Herodotus reiterates that he does not criticize oracles which are true, such as this one of Bacis. He then returns to the scene at Salamis.

What can we say about this performance? In the first place, it is not clear where Herodotus heard this oracle. He attributes it to Bacis. Did Herodotus hear it from a chresmologos who claimed it was from Bacis, or from someone else who it heard it from someone else who heard it from a chresmologos? Under what circumstances? From Herodotus’ account, the original composer of this oracle and the circumstances of his performance are not recoverable. The written record, the text of Herodotus, only permits us to ascertain that the performer in this instance is Herodotus himself and that he has chosen to apply this oracle to the circumstances at hand. Moreover, we cannot know for certain whether the battle of Salamis is the event to which this oracle originally referred.

How, we might wonder, is it possible to apply an oracle to an event which may not have generated it? Herodotus considers this oracle to be spoken clearly. Indeed, it does not contain any ambiguities. However, the oracle is not very specific. Does it refer to the Persian wars more generally or to this battle in particular? Is it merely part of a common stock of oracles which people knew and recalled when occasion arose? While the first two lines seem to describe the Persian naval maneuvers at Salamis, the attacker is not mentioned by name. Moreover, the last six verses express fairly stereotypical ideas. All enemies may be characterized as the “son of Hubris.” In all wars, bronze mixes with bronze. These last six lines could be used to address any number of situations in which Hellas or any member of Hellas found itself being attacked by an enemy. The generality of the sentiment allows these lines to have many applications. Thus, Herodotus recalls this oracle because he believes it is pertinent, and we may wonder to what degree, if at all, he has reshaped the first two verses so that they appear relevant. The motivation of this act of remembrance can be located in the belief that oracles, whatever their original venue, are preeminently true throughout all time. One must only remember, connect oracle to event, perform and have one’s audience (here Herodotus’ auditors or readers) accept one’s performance and thereby deem one’s oracle authentic.

At the end of Herodotus’ account of Salamis, when the Persians have been defeated, many of their shipwrecks drift to a place along the coast of Attica called Colias. Herodotus again interrupts his narrative to assert that the oracles of Bacis and Musaeus were fulfilled by the outcome of the war and, more specifically, that an oracle of an Athenian chresmologos Lysistratus was also fulfilled. Lysistratus’ one-line hexametric oracle, “Colian women will roast (barley) with oars,”

62. On Bacis, see How and Wells at 8.20 and 8.77, and Weinreich 1929: 57–60. For a survey of manteis and chresmologoi and their prophecies more generally, see How and Wells at 7.6; Halliday 1913; Pollard 1965; Kett 1966; Roth 1982; and Burkert 1992.
64. Hdt. 8.96.
amusingly deals the final blow to the Persians, for Persian warships will now be the cooking utensils of Greek women. While Herodotus gives the source of this oracle, all the questions about original venue and application stated above apply equally to this performance. No doubt this oracle, like that of Bacis, had been circulating orally for some time, although Herodotus says that this oracle largely had been forgotten. Nonetheless Herodotus performs and records this oracle, attaching it to this event, perhaps even recomposing it to do so, and thereby restores its place in collective memory, renewing an oracular tradition, if not the Delphic one.

Herodotus’ third oracle-performance occurs when he is recounting Mardonius’ preparations before the battle of Plataea. Before engaging in battle, Mardonius gathers his chief advisors and asks if anyone knows why he should not attack Greece. Herodotus reports that while many of Mardonius’ troops knew of some oracles predicting their defeat, they felt compelled to remain silent. When Mardonius mentions an oracle that warns the Persians not to attack Delphi, Herodotus again interrupts his narrative in order to “correct” Mardonius. Herodotus claims that the oracle to which Mardonius alludes refers not to the Persians but to the Illyrians and the Enchelean host. Thus Herodotus, as the audience of Mardonius’ oracle, claims, in effect, that Mardonius’ oracle is not authentic. However, if this oracle is not applicable to the Persians at the battle of Plataea, Herodotus states that many other oracles of Bacis and Musaeus are. To demonstrate this proposition, Herodotus introduces an oracle of Bacis consisting of four hexameters and thus reveals some characteristic features of the oral transmission of oracles. Since Herodotus imagines that some Persians knew relevant oracles but did not mention them, and he himself then recites one such oracle, he suggests a world in which oracles continually circulated. Everyone had access to oracles, and everyone had the freedom to recite them and to deem them applicable. Moreover, Herodotus’ “correction” of Mardonius suggests that the same oracle could refer potentially to several situations. One oracle warning against attacking Delphi could easily apply to anyone invading Greece. This reinforces the notion that oracles were continually applied and reapplied to different situations, that belief is a crucial component of oracular transmission, that the audience of any oracle had the authority to confer or deny an oracle’s authenticity, that oracles were a method for understanding the relationship between past, present and future, where

65. How and Wells 1991: ad loc. cite Pollux (i.246) who writes that Solon bade brides to carry a “roaster” at their weddings in order to signal that they would now become barley-workers.
67. Herodotus’ portrays the Persians as the complete antithesis of the Greeks; see Hartog 1988. Noisy Greek debate about the meaning of an oracle, such as we find in the story of the wooden wall oracle, is replaced by the Persians’ stony silence when asked by Mardonius if they know of any relevant oracles. Afraid to risk Mardonius’ displeasure, they do not reveal the oracular knowledge which, Herodotus implies, could have saved them. Herodotus’ correction of Mardonius, then, underscores the failures of a political system in which only one man’s perspective is allowed to be heard.
the boundaries between these categories were not clearly defined, that “truth” in oracular tales was determined by application and interpretation, not fidelity to or recovery of an original utterance. In light of the processes by which oracles are authenticated and introduced into the tradition of oracles, Delphic or otherwise, how can we interpret them?

**INTERPRETING THE WOODEN WALL ORACLE**

Recently, three different interpretations of Herodotus’ account of the “wooden wall” oracle were published. While these three accounts have very different conclusions, they all share several premises and a common goal: the recovery of what really happened in Athenian military history. Noel Robertson, for example, accepts the occasion, date, and contents of the of the oracle as historical fact. Placing himself in the position of an ancient auditor, he argues that the advice in the first oracle, “Flee to the ends of the earth,” originally meant that the Athenians should flee to the Peloponnese, while the “wooden wall” of the second oracle referred to the Isthmus wall the Spartans were fortifying. Thus, the Athenians were told to go to the Peloponnese and follow Sparta’s lead. “This reconstruction vindicates both Herodotus and the Delphic oracle,” because the oracles Herodotus records were the *ipsissima verba* of the Pythia uttered before the battle at Salamis, and because Herodotus’ account, being plausible, portrays events as they unfolded.

The title of Georges’ ambitious work, “Saving Herodotus’ Phenomena,” indicates that, like Robertson, Georges is interested in saving or recovering the true kernel of Herodotus’ account of events from 481 to 480 B.C.E. Georges adopts an old view of events: the oracles were late, at least later than Artemistium, they were issued “post-eventum,” and they were a Themistoclean ruse used to compel the Athenians to flee. Holladay also believes that the oracles were a result of Themistocles’ scheming. Thus, both Georges and Holladay find the oracles a ruse, but this firmly anchors them in the political world and implies that Herodotus’ account, at least nominally, is factually accurate. All three scholars, then, evaluate the “wooden wall” oracle in terms of its fidelity to a plausible reconstruction of the events leading up to the battle at Salamis, even if they recognize that the

68. Hdt. 7.141ff.
69. Georges 1986; Holladay 1987; Robertson 1987. This oracle has also been recently discussed by Vernant 1991: 312–14, who examines Herodotus’ account in order to understand the “intelligibility” deployed to interpret oracles. See also Manetti 1993: 32–35.
70. Robertson 1987: 11.
71. Robertson 1987: 11 argues that “this is definitely not a vaticinium ex eventum.”
72. After scrutinizing Themistocles’ decree, which mentions Salamis no less than three times, Robertson 1987: 12–14 argues that the Delphic oracle did not predict a battle at Salamis, but rather advised using Salamis as a base for the Greek fleet.
73. The notion that the oracles were a Themistoclean ruse is an old one. See, for example, Macan 1908.
74. Holladay 1987: 186 dates the oracles to 481 B.C.E.
story of events changed over time and that Herodotus' account represents the end result of "patriotic myth-making." Thus, their interpretations of Herodotus' account repeat with little variation those of Parke and Wormell and Fontenrose. In so doing, these recent interpretations suggest that the modern appreciation and understanding of the Delphic tradition has not changed substantially since the publication of the collections of Delphic oracles and that positivism governed by common sense and plausibility are still the cornerstone of interpreting Delphic tales. In other words, these scholars still look at oracles as responses to particular events that can be assigned to a particular time and place. But, as we have seen, oracular tales chronicle the eruption of the divine in the human world and are more concerned to establish the presence and miraculous nature of the divine on earth. Two types of history, secular and sacred respectively, are evident in the work of Herodotus, and are fundamentally different in their orientation. Once we recognize the wide gulf between them, and between modern assumptions and those of the tellers of these tales, with their oral compositional techniques, what interpretative strategies remain available to us?

To answer this question adequately would require more argument and space than the present study would allow. Therefore, I will make a few brief remarks about the "wooden wall" oracle as well as the oracle that the Athenian ambassadors refused to accept and authenticate, and which modern scholars, ironically, tend to ignore. In the opening lines of the "wooden wall" oracle, Athena supplicates Zeus on behalf of Athens and thus moves the battlefield from earth to Olympus, where the fate of the Athenians becomes an exchange between gods and not human protagonists. While the use of hexameter in oracles need not recall Homeric poetry, this opening gambit surely recalls the Iliad and Thetis' supplication of Zeus. While locating the fact of war and the fate of the Athenians among the gods changes the perspective the Athenians might adopt about the inevitable hardship they will face, it does not remove their responsibility to determine the best course of action through an examination of the enigmatic advice the oracle provides. It is precisely this combination of secular and sacred reasoning that confounds moderns. We need not resort to simple psychologizing—e.g., considering the gods as the ultimate source of the war would provide some measure of comfort to the Athenians—to explain the presence of the gods in this oracle. We need simply to consider the description of Athens in the first oracle to understand their role here, one ignored without exception by all modern scholars.

The first oracle provides an arresting depiction of Athens under siege. In the third and fourth lines Athens is described in terms of the human body: "The head shall not remain in its place, nor the body, nor the feet beneath, nor the

77. Dougherty 1993 and McGlew 1993 represent two notable exceptions to this trend.
hands, nor the part between.”78 Since the work of anthropologists such as that of Mary Douglas, we are in the habit of thinking of cities, both their physical dimensions and more abstractly their populations, in terms of the human body.79 Yet, it is not clear when, if at all, the Greeks conceptualized their cities in this way. These lines may suggest that they did and may be the first instantiation of such a conception. However, in his analysis of the streets of Megara Hyblaea, Jesper Svenbro argues that the land is divided as a sacrificial victim would be.80 Thus we should hesitate before we assume that the human body was a central metaphor for the city for the Athenians, as modern theory might lead us to believe. Indeed, another related description of Athens intrudes upon this one in lines eight to ten: “[The god of War shall] give to pitiless fire many shrines of gods. Which even now stand sweating, with fear quivering, while over the rooftops black blood runs streaming in prophecy of woe that needs must come.” Oozing in anticipation of the Persian destruction, the temples of the gods become both animate and prophetic. If Athens does have a head, body, feet and hands, it remains unclear exactly to whom these belong or perhaps more accurately whom they symbolize, the land itself, the people or the gods. In any case, it seems that insofar as temples of the gods suffer the same fate as Athens, the city is the place where the gods reside and it is alive with their presence. To desert it is to desert them. This is precisely what Themistocles convinces the Athenians to do.

During the debate over the second oracle, the Athenians must decide whether to take an offensive posture against the Persians that means leaving their city or a defensive posture that requires that they remain in Athens, perhaps on the Acropolis. This decision is not simply a military issue, for it involves an understanding of what comprises Athens—its population or its physical territory, filled as it is with the living temples of the gods. Both oracles indirectly revolve around this question, one that we can imagine would naturally have presented itself at this time in Athens’ history, a time when Greece’s identity has come into question in the face of the Persian invasion, and individual Greek cities must define themselves in relation to Persia and to one another. Literary forms, irregardless of their author’s point of view or station, “reflect the Sitz im Leben in which they were produced.”81 These two oracles reflect a crisis in the very definition of Athens as a city. Whether they reflect particular historical details and can be mined for them, as many scholars have tried to do, is unlikely.

Tellers of oracular tales were interested in how oracles were divine utterances which eluded human comprehension because of their tropic nature. That is, they were interested in the interstices of language, its capacity to hold multiple meanings that can make manifest the presence of the divine breaking in on the

78. Translations of this oracle are from Selincourt 1974.
79. Douglas 1989, and see Sennett 1994, for example.
human world. These authoritative tale tellers created oracular narratives that emblematized their Sitz im Leben, which always involved human and divine interaction, the gap between human and divine intelligence, and the tragedy of the human condition that resulted, as it inevitably did, in the space where human strivings to hear and comprehend the divine on earth often failed. The community of believers, who authored the Delphic oracles as well as their narrative frames, have left us a tradition of oracular tales containing authentic oracles whose very purpose was to transcend the particularities of time, place, and circumstance in favor of establishing Apollo's presence on earth. If modern historians insist on recovering the factual details of any one story in the service of a modern secularism or positivism, they risk robbing all of Greece of its sweating temples and bleeding rooftops.

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82. An elegiac poem found in the Ceramicus composed for the Athenians who fell under Tolmides at Coronea in 447 B.C.E. establishes the connection between the fulfilment of one oracle and the very existence of Apollo and the gods. “Enduring ones, how you have lasted to the end your struggle in the hopeless fight, and lost your lives by divine power in war—not by the strength of men who opposed you, but one of the half-gods came into the Goddess’ Road against you and wrought your undoing. The oracle which he gave with seeming good will, of a prey hard for foesmen to hunt, that oracle he himself fulfilled to your ruin by his pursuit. For all men forever he made the accomplishment of oracles trustworthy and to be reckoned on.” Translation from Bowra 1938: 80. It is not clear which hero gave the Athenians an oracle. Bowra rejects Trophonius, who had a temple on the road from Chaeronea to Coronea, in favor of Orion, a prophet who was a hero of the Boeotians. He had three sites, in Tanagra, Thebes, and Hyria, and perhaps Tolmides, as Bowra imagines, passed through Thebes.


