

The fear of human beings when faced with the mysteries of life and their weakness by comparison with the vastness of nature created in them a need to communicate with the divine, with the superior powers which they believed regulated the universe and determined their own fates. Knowledge of wishes of the gods was always a sure guide for human behavior. In ancient Greece, the precise nature of these wishes was 'decoded' by the art of giving oracles, practiced by soothsayers who had the gift of understanding the signs or signals sent by the gods.

The soothsayers uttered their oracles by interpreting flashes of lightening, rolls of thunder or the flights of certain birds of prey (omens); alternatively, they might observe the direction in which the fire burned when a sacrifice was made, examine the entrails of animals which had just been sacrificed, or base judgments on the sacrificial beast's willingness to approach the altar. The interpretation of dreams was popular too, and so was palmistry. The most notable soothsayers of ancient Greece were Tiresias, Calchas, Helenus, Amphiaraus and Cassandra.

However, there were abundant instances in which the gods did not manifest themselves to the faithful in the forms of signs but spoke directly to an intermediate who for a short time was overcome by a 'divine mania' and transcended his own human essence. Here the prophet- or more usually the prophetess- entered a state of ecstasy in which he or she delivered the message from the gods to the suppliants.

These practices for foreseeing the future were the basis on which the ancient Greek oracles operated. Each oracle was located within a properly-organized sanctuary and was directly associated with one or other of the gods. Apollo was the archetypal soothsayer for the Greeks, the god who was responsible for conveying to mortals the decisions pronounced by Zeus. The most important of all the oracles, that at the Delphi, delivered the messages with the intervention of Apollo, while the oldest that of Dodona, functioned with the assistance of Zeus.

The Ancient Art of Prophecy

The divine powers are communicated by feeble human beings to uncover truth and seek guidance. Human beings, especially Greeks, ^{had} ~~have~~ always tried to know the will of the divine in order to align their conduct. Therefore, they deconstructed and interpreted the wishes of the divine by the oracles. This practice decoded the divine message by considering the natural signs, elements of earth, direction and patterns of natural phenomenon, behavior of animals and flights of birds. Likewise, the arts of interpreting the dreams and reading the palms were common. However, there was no explicit manifestation by God in some cases and the message was conveyed to prophets or prophetess who delivered the divine will to the masses. The Greeks had numerous oracles each linked to a specific god. Hence, the oracles served as a bridge between the god, Zeus, and the mortals. :-

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