

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 the wishes of the gods was always a sure guide for human behaviour. In ancient Greece, the precise nature of these wishes was 'decoded' by the art of giving oracles, practised by soothsayers who had the gift of understanding the signs or signals sent by the gods.

The soothsayers uttered their oracle by interpreting flashes of lightning, 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 organised sanctuary and was directly associated with one or more 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 Dodona, functioned with the assistance of Zeus.

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The innate fear of human beings became evident, when they compared themselves to the infinite universe, promoted humans to seek guidance from the superior powers controlling the universe. In ancient Greece, the commands of the divine were decoded by soothsayers. Interpretation of dreams and palmistry became popular ways for foretelling the future. Sometimes, the gods instead of giving signs, spoke directly to the chosen prophets upon their entering in state of ecstasy. Similarly, the Greek oracles ^{the decision} conveyed to people of dicties