

Original Passage

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.

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Human Need to Communicate with Divine

The human beings, confronted with the mysteries of life and their comparative weakness, comforted themselves by trying to communicate with the powers controlling the universe. They were seeking guide by inquiring wishes of the gods, which was done in ancient Greece by soothsayers. These soothsayers gave oracles by decoding natural events, sacrifices, dreams and palmistry. Piresias, Calchas, Helenus, Amphiaraus and Cassandra were the most famous soothsayers of ancient Greece. There were also prophets who spoke directly to gods in a state of transcendence and delivered their message to supplicants. The Greek oracles worked on these principles and were associated with any of the gods. For example, Apollo delivered the decisions of Zeus, while the famous oracle at Delphi worked under Apollo's influence and that of Dodona under Zeus.

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