

## ANTHROPOLOGY AND SPIRIT POSSESSION: A RECONSIDERATION OF THE PYTHIA'S ROLE AT DELPHI

DURING a consultation at Delphi, one of Apollo's servants imagined, heard, intuited, or feigned Apollo's presence and then uttered Apollo's divine response to the human client who made inquiry of the god. Such inspired mimicry appears incomprehensible to the non-believing distant observer to whom Apollo no longer speaks. Scholars hear nothing at Delphi and steadfast in their faith in positivism, claim Apollo said nothing. In a similar fashion, scholars have pronounced that the Pythia, like Apollo, did not speak at Delphi, or that her attendant prophets reformulated her utterances and converted them into comprehensible prose or verse. Such a reconstruction of the divinatory consultation at Delphi, however, finds no support in the ancient evidence. *Not one ancient source suggests that anyone other than the Pythia issued oracular responses.*

While the question of Apollo's presence at Delphi may be deferred, the issue of whether the Pythia spoke at Delphi is a historical one.<sup>1</sup> Beginning with Erwin Rohde's monumental study, *Psyche: The cult of souls and belief in immortality among the Greeks*, the nature of divine possession and the Pythia's service at Delphi have attracted much attention. Although many of Rohde's ideas have been refuted, the connection he drew between possession and seemingly uncontrolled and uncontrollable rapture, such as that of the Bacchantes, remains a more or less unspoken assumption of subsequent inquiries. While most scholars have not accepted Rohde's historical reconstruction of the influence of Dionysus on Apolline cult at Delphi,<sup>2</sup> the image of the raging Maenad remains the dominant model for understanding and imagining the nature of possession and the Pythia's position at Delphi.

The image of the Maenad has held sway in the scholarship on Delphi because it seems to resonate with aspects of certain literary depictions of the Pythia as well as with Plutarch's account of a frenzied, speechless, and uncontrollable Pythia at a disastrous consultation at Delphi.<sup>3</sup> According to H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell, Plutarch's account is 'the only

<sup>1</sup> The following works are referred to by author's name: E. Rohde, *Psyche: The cult of souls and belief in immortality among the Greeks*, translated by W.B. Hillis from the eighth edition (New York 1925); T. Krammer, s.v. *Prophetes* in *The theological dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Friedrich, trans. G.W. Bromley (Grand Rapids 1968) vi; E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the irrational* (Berkeley 1951); P. Amandry, *La mantique apollinienne à Delphes: Essai sur le fonctionnement de l'oracle* (Paris 1950); H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell, *The Delphic oracle* (Oxford 1956); C.R. Whittaker, 'The Delphic oracle: belief and behaviour in ancient Greece—and Africa', *HTR* lvii (1965) 21-48; G. Roux, *Delphes: son oracle et ses dieux* (Paris 1976); J. Fontenrose, *The Delphic oracle* (Berkeley 1978); R. Padel, 'Women: model for possession by Greek daemons', in *Images of women in antiquity*, ed. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (Detroit 1983) 3-19; S. Price, 'Delphi and divination', in *Greek religion and society*, ed. P. Easterling and J.V. Muir (Cambridge 1985) 128-54; R. Parker, 'Greek oracles and Greek states', in *Cruce: Essays presented to G.E.M. de Ste. Croix on his 75th birthday*, ed. P.A. Cartledge and F.D. Harvey (Sidmouth 1985); G. Sissa, *Greek Virginité*, trans. A. Goldhammer, (Cambridge MA 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Rohde's thesis that prophecy and possession originally belonged to Dionysus and not Apollo has been sensibly refuted by Kurt Latte, who has argued that in the East, Apollo is also associated with prophecy and, very often, he has female priestesses. K. Latte, 'The coming of the Pythia', *HTR* xxxiii (1940) 9-19. Latte cites two inscriptions from Tralles, in W.M. Ramsay, *Cities and bishoprics of Phrygia* (Oxford 1895) i 95, no. 115 and L. Robert, *Études anatoliennes* (Paris 1937) 407 as well as Herodotus' comments on the priestess of Apollo in Patara (i 182). See also W. Burkert, 'Itinerant diviners and magicians: a neglected element in cultural contacts', in *The Greek renaissance of the eighth century BC: Tradition and innovation*, ed. Robin Hägg, (Stockholm 1983) 117 n. 24; B.C. Dietrich, 'Reflections on the origins of the oracular Apollo', *BICS* xxv (1978) 1-18. In a different vein, Dodds has rejected Rohde's thesis, arguing that it relies more on a Nietzschean dichotomy between 'rational' Apollo and 'irrational' Dionysus than on the evidence at hand. E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks, The Greeks and the irrational* (Berkeley 1951) 69.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Lucan's *Pharsalia* (v 123-224), Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (1072-1330), and Vergil's *Cumaean Sibyl* (*Aen.* vi 33-15; *Plut. Mor.* 438).