

Delphi

By Paul Robertson, University of New Hampshire

Entry tags: Religious Group, Greek Religions, Hellenistic Religions, Ancient Mediterranean, Religious Place, Monument, Temple, Religious Complex, Temenos, shrines, Greek Cult, Archaeological monument, Polytheistic

Delphi was the main, institutional oracular site in ancient Greece. On an ancient temple site with purported divinatory practices going as far back at 1600 BCE, it became a formal cult site of Apollo and his oracle in the 8th century BCE. The central religious activity was the Oracle at Delphi, also known as the "Pythia" after the primordial, mythical python slain by the god Apollo at the site to claim it for the Greek pantheon. The Pythia was both the high priestess of Apollo and his oracular mouthpiece, uttering authoritative but vague and often frenzied prophecies that made her the object of fascination across the ancient Mediterranean. The Pythia was attended by a formal priesthood in charge of the cult site and its practices. This cult site grew to become a major cultural and pilgrimage center, with extensive structures including temples, a treasury, theater, sanctuary, gymnasium, stadium, hippodrome, and extensive statuary and other offerings.

Date Range: 800 BCE - 393 CE

Region: Delphi

Region tags: Europe, Southeastern Europe, Southern Europe, Greece, Eastern Mediterranean, Aegean

The Temple of Delphi, containing both the site of the Oracle at Delphi as well as the greater sanctuary containing a host of buildings including temples, athletic facilities, and a treasury.

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Religious Specialists

General Variables

Sources and Excavations

Print Sources

Print sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: William J. Broad (2006). *The Oracle: Ancient Delphi and the Science Behind its Lost Secrets*. New York: Penguin.
- Source 2: Joan Breton Connelly (2007). *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Source 3: Joseph Eddy Fontenrose (1978). *The Delphic Oracle, its responses and operations, with a catalogue of responses*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Online Sources

Online sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <http://www.e-delphi.gr/>
- Source 1 Description: Official website of the Delphi site, with text and archaeology database
- Source 2 URL: <http://www.delphi.diadrasis.net/en-gb/site/excavations.aspx>
- Source 2 Description: A summary of the excavations
- Source 3 URL: <https://www.ancient-greece.org/museum/muse-delphi.html>
- Source 3 Description: Archaeological Museum at Delphi

Has this place been the focus of excavation (pre-modern, illicit, or scientific):

Answer 'Yes' for each period or type of excavation.

– Yes



Type of excavation:

- Scientific



Years of excavation:

- Year range: 1892-present



Name of excavation

- Official or descriptive name: La Grande Fouille ("The Great Excavation"), 1892-1903; continuous excavations since

Notes: Jacquemin, A. (ed) (2000). Delphes Cent Ans après la Grande fouille. Essai de bilan. Actes du colloque organisé par l'EFA, 17-20 septembre 1992, BCH supplément 36

Topographical Context

Is the place associated with a feature in the landscape

– Elevation



Type of elevation

- Mountain
- Rock face
- Other [specify]: Cracks in rocks over geological fissures

Does the place involve human-made features besides structure:

Other features might be ground clearing, terracing, other modifications of the local environment.

– Yes

- ↳ Type of feature
 - Leveling of ground
 - Terracing
 - Clearing
 - Trackway or road-surface
 - Other [specify]: Extensive statuary, buildings, athletic facilities, temples

Is the place situated in an urban or significantly urbanized area:

- No

Is the place situated in a rural setting:

- Yes

- ↳ Are there settlements in close proximity to the place:
 - Yes

- ↳ Are there routes of travel in close proximity to the place:
 - Yes

Is the place situated far removed from non-religious places of habitation:

- Yes

- ↳ Is there a established route of travel connecting it to a wider transportation network:
 - Yes

Structures Present

Are there structures or features present:

Instructions: Answer for each structure/feature or group that can be differentiated.

- Yes

- ↳ A single structure
 - No

- ↳ One single feature
 - Clearing

↳ A group of structures:

– Yes

↳ Are they part of a single design/construction stage:

– No

↳ A group of features:

– Yes

↳ Are they part of a single design/construction stage:

– No

↳ Is it part of a larger place/sanctuary:

– Yes

↳ What is the function of the structure/feature or group:

Answer "Yes" once for each distinct function

– Worship

↳ Worship:

– Other [specify]: Solicit oracular utterance

– Political

– Social

↳ Is the structure/feature finished:

– Yes

↳ Was the structure/feature intended to last beyond a generation:

– Yes

↳ Was the structure/feature modified through time:

– Yes

↳ Was the structure/feature destroyed:

– Yes

↳ How was the structure/feature destroyed
– Burned

↳ Was it destroyed deliberately:
– For religious reasons
– As the result of war
– As the result of pillage

↳ Was it destroyed by accident/natural phenomena:
– Other [specify]: Earthquake; geological shifting

↳ Has the structure/feature been reconstructed:
– Yes

↳ In antiquity
– Periodically

↳ In modernity
– Post-Renaissance

Reasons for Creation/Construction/Consecration

Is the place used for the worship of/communication with non-human supernatural beings:
– Yes

↳ Dedicated to a supernatural being:
– Yes [specify]: Apollo

↳ Dedicated to more than one supernatural being:
– No

Is the place used for the worship of a semi-divine human being:
– No

Is the place used for the worship of non-divine ancestors:
– No

Was the place commissioned/built by an official political entity:

A political entity is a local power structure that leverages a workforce.

– Yes

↳ Specify

– Council of elders

Were the Structures built by specific groups of people:

– Yes

↳ Groups:

– Specialized labourers/craftspeople

Was the place thought to have originated as the result of divine intervention:

– Yes

↳ Specify

– Revealed by other kind of supernatural being(s) [specify]: Site established by Greek god Apollo, who killed the mythical python at the site and established the omphalos ("navel") stone

Was the place created to mark or commemorate the birthplace of a supernatural or human being:

– No

Was the place created as the result of an event:

– Yes

↳ Specify

– Other [specify]: Greek god Apollo killed the primordial python at the site and established Greek pantheon dominance there

Was the creation of the place sponsored by external financial/material donation:

– Yes

↳ Is this sponsor of the same religious group/tradition as the main usage of the place:

– Yes

Was the establishment of the place motivated by:

- Expression of devotion with no expectation of favor in return

Was the place built specifically for housing scriptures/sacred texts:

- No

Design and Material Remains

Overall Structure

Is the place made up of multiple built structures:

- Yes

↳ Are any of the structures attached to or associated with a landscape feature:

- Yes

↳ Are any of the structures attached to other structures:

- Yes

↳ Is there a hierarchy among the structures:

- Yes

Is monumental architecture present:

Monumental architecture is defined here as a built structure that surpasses average human proportions and in general is larger and more complex than is necessary to fulfill the structure's utilitarian function(s). Examples of monumental architecture include Mesopotamian Ziggurats, Egyptian Pyramids, Greek and Roman temples, Mesoamerican Pyramids, North American and Aegean burial mounds, etc.

- Yes

↳ In the average place, what percentage of area is taken up by built monuments:

- Percentage: 50

↳ Footprint of largest single religious monument, square meters:

Please add dimensions in the comments, if known.

- Square meters: 2500

Notes: The Theater

↳ Height of largest single religious monument, meters:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Size of average monument, square meters:

– Square meters: 150

Notes: Approximate number based on survey of properly scaled field plan

↳ Height of average monument, meters:

– Field doesn't know

Is the structure/feature made out of natural materials:

Answer [Yes] for each material type

– Yes

↳ Earth

– No

↳ Sand

– No

↳ Clay

– No

↳ Plaster

– No

↳ Wood

– No

↳ Grass

– No

↳ Stone

– Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:

– Yes

↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:

– No

↳ Other

–Other [specify]: Substantial use of marble and stone, often unmortared limestone

Is the structure/feature made out of human-made materials

– No

Decoration

Is decoration present:

– Yes

↳ Is decoration part of the building (permanent):

– Yes

↳ On the outside:

– Yes

↳ On the inside:

– Yes

↳ Is decoration attached to the building, i.e. movable reliefs or tapestries

– Field doesn't know

↳ Is the decoration figural:

A figural representation is defined here as one that contains the depiction of discernible human, anthropomorphic, animal, or zoomorphic forms. In general, it differentiates between animate and inanimate beings, as well as between narrative compositions and still life, landscapes, abstraction, etc. Answer [Yes] for each type of figure depicted

– Yes

↳ Are there gods depicted:

– Yes

↳ Are there other supernatural beings depicted:

– Yes

↳ Are there humans depicted:

– Yes

↳ Are there animals depicted:

– Yes

↳ Are there animal-human hybrids depicted:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Is the decoration non-figural:

– Yes

↳ Is it geometric/abstract

– Yes

↳ Floral motifs

– Yes

↳ Is it writing/caligraphy

– Yes

↳ Other [Specify]

– Other [specify]: Substantial statuary and pedimentary decoration, paired with images of gods, humans, animals, plants, and other classical Greek decorative features

↳ Is the decoration hidden or restricted from view:

– No

↳ Are there statues present:

– Yes

↳ Cult statues:

– Yes

↳ Statues of gods/supernatural beings:

– Yes

↳ Statues of humans:

– Yes

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: Several prominent statues, e.g. "The Charioteer of Delphia, "The Alter of Chians", "The Dancers of Delphi"

↳ Are there reliefs present:

A relief—as opposed to sculpture carved on the round—is a work of sculpture in which the figures project from a background support, generally a flat surface. Reliefs can be carved out of stone, clay, or a similar material.

– Yes

↳ Reliefs representing the god(s) worshipped at the place:

– Yes

↳ Reliefs representing mythological narratives:

– Yes

↳ Reliefs representing human/historical narratives:

– Yes

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: Marble bas reliefs commonly decorated the structures, depicting both mythical scenes constructed in dedication and recent human battles constructed in triumph

↳ Are there paintings present:

– Yes

↳ Are they panel paintings [movable]:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Are they wall paintings:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Paintings representing the gods worshipped at the place:
– Field doesn't know

↳ Paintings representing mythological narratives:
– Yes

↳ Paintings representing human/historical narratives:
– Yes

↳ Other [Specify]
–Other [specify]: Lost frescoes by Polygnotus

Notes: The famous Greek painter Polygnotus painted two large frescoes: one on the capture of Troy (Trojan War), the other Odysseus' trip to Hades (Underworld). These mostly lost paintings occurred in the Lesche of the Knidians, a meeting place. See description of these paintings in Pausanius, 10.25-31.

↳ Are there mosaics present:
– Field doesn't know

↳ Are there inscriptions as part of the decoration:
– Yes

↳ Are the inscriptions ornamental:
– Yes

↳ Are the inscriptions informative/declarative
[e.g. historical narratives, calendars, donor lists etc...]
– Yes

↳ Are the inscription a formal dedication:
– Yes

↳ Other [Specify]
–Other [specify]: The site contains hundreds of slave manumissions inscribed in stone in a wall on site, dedicated to Apollo

↳ Other type of decoration:

– Yes [specify]: Variety of altars and significant finds

Notes: <https://thedelphiguide.com/the-excavations-at-delphi-scientific-american-1909/>

Iconography

Are there distinct features in the places iconography:

– Yes

↳ Eyes (stylized or not)

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings (zoomorphic)

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings (geomorphic)

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings (anthropomorphic)

– Yes

↳ Supernatural being (abstract)

– Yes

↳ Portrayals of afterlife

– Yes

↳ Aspects of doctrine (e.g. cross, trinity, Mithraic symbols)

– Yes

↳ Humans

– Yes

↳ Supernatural narratives

– Yes

↳ Human narratives

– Yes



Other [Specify]

– Other [specify]: The "Omphalos Stone", the mythical navel of the earth, placed by Apollo after defeating the mythical Python

Beliefs and Practices

Funerary Associations

Is this place a tomb/burial:

– No

Is this a place for the worship of the dead:

– No

Is this a place for treatment of the corpse:

– No

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

Co-sacrifices are animal/human sacrifices prompted by the death of the primary occupant of the tomb/burial.

– No

Are grave goods present:

– No

Are formal burials present:

– No

Supernatural Beings

Is a supreme high god is present:

– No

Does the supreme high god communicates with the living at this place:

– No

Are previously human spirits present:

– No

Do human spirits communicate with the living at this place:

– No

Are nonhuman supernatural beings are present:

– Yes

↳ Human spirits can be seen:

– Yes

↳ Human spritis can be phyiscally felt:

– Yes

Do nonhuman spirits communicate with the living at this place:

– Yes

↳ In waking, everyday life:

– No

↳ In dreams:

– Yes

↳ In trance possession:

– Yes

↳ Through divination practices:

– Yes

↳ Only through religious specialists:

– Yes

↳ Only through monarch:

– No

↳ Other

–Other [specify]: The Pythian priestess provides an oracular pronouncement from the god Apollo, a process which was managed or interpreted by temple priests

Are mixed human-divine beings are present:

– No

Do mixed human-divine beings communicate with the living at this place:

– No

Is the supernatural being/high god present in the form of a cult statue(s):

– Yes

↳ Is the cult statue visible:

– Yes

↳ Is the cult statue hidden:

– No

Supernatural Interactions

Is supernatural monitoring present:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural monitoring of norm adherence:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect offerings:

– Yes

↳ Libations:

–Yes [specify]: Typically wine

↳ Offerings of food:

–Yes [specify]: Meat, often oxen

↳ Animal sacrifice:

– Yes [specify]: Oxen, goats

↳ Human sacrifice:

– No

↳ Sacred objects:

– Yes [specify]: Tripod (the so-called "Tripod of Delphi"), a Greek stand used for ceremonial, decorative, and some functional applications, such as offerings or seating.

↳ Daily life objects:

– Yes [specify]: Water, incense

↳ Other:

– Other [specify]: Laurel branch, connected to Apollo's mythology

↳ Supernatural beings care about sex:

– Yes

Notes: The Pythian priestess needed to be a virgin of high reputation

↳ Does the worship include sex acts/references:

– No

– No

Notes: Those coming to the sanctuary to receive an oracle or participate in other religious activities did not need to be virginal

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect proper ritual observance:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect performance of rituals:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect maintenance of the place:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about or expect personal hygiene:

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings care about honoring oaths:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Other:

–Other [specify]: Those asking for an oracle would be expected to perform rituals of purification and offering; meanwhile, it is uncertain the exact ritual behavior of the Pythian priestess

Do visitors communicate with the gods or supernatural beings:

– Yes

↳ Do visitors communicate with gods:

– Yes

↳ Do visitors communicate with other supernatural beings:

– No

Ritual and Performance

Sacrifices, Offerings, and Maintenance

Are sacrifices performed at this place:

– Yes

↳ Are there animal sacrifices:

– Yes [specify]: Oxen, goats

↳ Are there human sacrifices:

– No

↳ Are the sacrificed humans associated in some way:

– No

Are there self-sacrifices present:

– No

Are material offerings present:

– Yes

↳ Are material offerings mandatory:

– Yes

↳ Are material offerings composed of valuable objects:

– Yes

↳ Are material offerings composed of daily-life objects:

– Yes

↳ Are material offerings interred at this place (in caches):

– Yes

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: The Sanctuary became a major political site as well, which led to the establishment of a formal Treasury building by the Athenian delegation

Is attendance to worship/sacrifice mandatory:

– No

Is maintenance of the place performed:

– Yes

↳ Is it required:

– Yes

↳ Is there cleansing (for the maintenance)

– Yes

↳ Are there periodic repairs/reconstructions:

– Yes

↳ Is the maintenance performed by permanent staff

– Yes

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: There were permanent priests at the sanctuary, who were augmented with regular visits from skilled maintenance and religious staff from various visiting delegations

Pilgrimage and Festivals

Are pilgrimages present:

– Yes

↳ How strict is pilgrimage:
– optional (rare)

↳ Are pilgrimages the main reason for construction/establishment of place:
– No

↳ Are pilgrimages to this place associated with significant life events:
– Yes

↳ Birth
– No

↳ Transition to adulthood
– No

↳ Death
– Yes

↳ Other
– Other [specify]: The Oracle consulted on significant political and military matters from civic delegations as well as personal requests from individuals; the ratio varied over time

↳ Does pilgrimage to this place involve follow established routes (roads)
– Yes

↳ Are these routes maintained together with the place:
– Yes

Is this place a venue for feasting:

– Yes

- ↳ Is feasting connected to the worship/sacrifices performed at this place:
 - Yes
- ↳ Is feasting sponsored by the same entity that built/maintains the place:
 - Yes
 - ↳ Priests
 - Yes
 - ↳ Local elites
 - Yes
 - ↳ Private contributions
 - Yes
 - ↳ Other
 - Other [specify]: Major benefactors built up structures representing their delegations, e.g. the Athenian Treasury, which was paired with a local priesthood
- ↳ Does feasting occur in a specific location with the place:
 - Yes [specify]: Ceremonial grounds outside the inner sanctuary

Are festivals present:

– Yes

- ↳ Frequency of festivals
 - specify: Pythian Games, once every four years, in a cycle with the Olympian, Nemean, and Isthmian Games
- ↳ Do all members of the society participate in the festival(s):
 - All members
- ↳ Are festivals a defining element in the construction/decoration of the place:
 - Yes
 - ↳ Requires special maintenance/cleansing of the place
 - Yes

- ↳ Requires new construction/decoration of the place
 - Yes
- ↳ Requires maintenance/replacement of cult statue(s)
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ On average, how many participants gather at this place:
 - number: 10,000+, the theater holds nearly 15,000
- ↳ Is feasting part of the festival(s)
 - Yes
- ↳ Is food consumption limited to certain members of the population
 - Elites
 - Non-elites
 - Religious professionals

Notes: Sacrificial festivals occurred, where food would be distributed across social lines, but the choicest portions typically would go to the elites and religious professionals first

Divination and Healing

Is divination present:

– Yes

- ↳ Divination by examination of the exta

Animals remains, internal organs, answer this question and subsequent question once for each species

 - Yes
- ↳ Species
 - Yes [specify]: Goat
- ↳ Part
 - Yes [specify]: Liver
- ↳ Remains are consumed

– Field doesn't know

↳ Remains are disposed of
– Field doesn't know

↳ Divination through human communication:
– Yes

↳ Is a human being the vehicle for the oracle:
– Yes

↳ Is a human being the interpreter of the oracle:
– Yes

↳ Are the oracle interpreters of specified sex/gender
– Yes

↳ Are the oracle interpreters of specified ethnicity:
– Yes

↳ Are the oracle interpreters of specified class:
– Yes

↳ Is sex-deprivation required:
– Yes

↳ Are intoxicants required:
– Yes

Notes: Leading theories suggest the Pythian priestess' frenzied oracles were the result of vapors from geological cracks on site; this theory is disputed

↳ Physical ordeal required:
– Yes

Notes: Accounts describe the act of oracular frenzy as extremely taxing, with the Pythian priestess necessitating a substantial recovery time, and few reaching old age

↳ Divination through animal-behavior:

– Yes

↳ Wild-animals

– Yes

↳ Domesticated animals

– Yes

↳ Captive animals

– Yes

↳ Divination through non-living material:

– Other [specify in comments]

Notes: The Oracle reportedly held a bowl of water she would gaze into before/during her prophecy

– Other [specify in comments]

Notes: Lots were drawn to establish the order of who would first consult the Oracle

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: Evidence records the presence of substantial smoke around the Oracle's chambers

Is healing present/practiced at this place:

– No

Notes: Apollo was associated with healing; it is plausible healing occurred at this sanctuary

Do rituals occur at this place:

Rituals are visibly enacted behaviors by one or more people for the purposes of religious observance.

– Yes

↳ Do large-scale rituals take place:

– Yes

↳ Do small-scale rituals take place:

– Yes

↳ On average how many participants are present in large-scale rituals:

– specify: 10,000

↳ How often do these rituals take place:

– specify: Once every four years

↳ Are there orthodoxy checks:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Are there orthopraxy checks:

– Yes

Notes: Ritual processions and sacrifices would take place, functionally upholding a common ritual orthopraxy

↳ Are there synchronic practices:

– No

↳ Are there intoxicants used during the ritual:

– Yes

Notes: Leading theories attribute the Oracle's frenzied prophecy to vapors arising from cracks in the surrounding, faultline-filled geography; others suggest hallucinogenic smoke inhalation. Both theories are contested.

Institutions and Scriptures

Religious Specialists

Are religious specialists present/in charge of this place:

Religious specialists are individuals whose primary duties within a population group are not concerned with subsistence or craft production but the maintenance of the religious landscape and culture of the group.

– Yes

↳ Present full time

– Yes

↳ Present part time

– Yes

↳ Are the religious specialists of specific sex/gender

– Yes

↳ Are the religious specialists of specific ethnicity

– Yes

↳ Are the religious specialists of specific class/cast

– Yes

↳ Are religious specialists dedicate to the place for life

– Yes

↳ Are the religious specialists stratified in a hierarchical system:

– Yes

↳ Is access within the space segregated by this hierarchy

– Yes

Notes: The Oracle alone could spend time in the inner sanctum/cave

Does this place incorporate a living space for religious specialists:

– Yes

Is this palce used for the training of religious specialists:

– Field doesn't know

Are there formal institutions for the maintenance of the place:

institutions that are authorized by the religious community or political leaders

– Yes

Notes: Civic delegations from across Greece contributed money, labor and expertise to the maintenance, building, and execution of cult site activities

Bureaucracy

Is there a formal bureaucracy present at this place:

A bureaucracy consists of a hierarchical system of accounting and rule maintance primarily concerned with material wealth.

– Yes

|

↳ Is a bureaucracy present permanently

– Yes

↳ Is a bureaucracy present temporarily/seasonally

– Yes

Does this place control economic resources (land, goods, tools):

– Yes

↳ Is this control the primary supporting income of this place

– No

↳ Does this place lease out land

– Field doesn't know

↳ Does this place lease out tools

– Field doesn't know

Public Works

Does this place serve as a location for services to the community:

– Yes

↳ Public food distribution and/or storage

– Field doesn't know

↳ Place for civic functions (census, elections, others)

– Yes

↳ Place for the practice of justice (trials, executions, etc.)

– Field doesn't know

↳ Function for water management

– Yes

Notes: Sacred spring on site, may have been used for water management for surrounding community

↳ Part of the transportation network

– No

↳ Other

–Other [specify]: Site served as major religious and athletic site to fashion a pan-Greek notion of Hellenism throughout Greek history

Writing/Scriptures

Is non-religious writing stored at this place:

Economic documents, records etc.

– Yes

Notes: Most notably there were hundreds of records of slave manumissions, albeit dedicated to Apollo; there were also likely documents pertaining to civic, diplomatic, and economic matters around the cult site's activity given its size and importance across various Greek city-states

Are there scriptures associated with this place

– No

Notes: The Oracle is notable for her lack of required literacy, though likely many of the priestesses were educated as they were chosen from a particular caste. A collection of oracles has been made in modern scholarship, but there is no evidence such a collection existed at Delphi or in ancient times