

# I WAS A PRIESTESS AT DELPHI: A HISTORICAL MEDITATION

*Defenstrix*

**T**his creative vignette comes from the author's meditations, and while not historically recorded, provides us with the vibrancy of the life of the Pythian priestesses at Delphi.

My name was Mnestra, and I was a priestess at Delphi in the fourth century BCE. When Aristotle was nineteen and he visited Delphi to ask for advice regarding his future life, I was thirty.

As Pythia-to-be, I was chosen by Poites, the high priest of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. The lot fell upon me on the basis of a favorable prediction. Just then I was a young, childless widow, and I considered a chance like this to be a privilege. I was educated and I was aware of my own remarkable beauty.

When I arrived at Delphi by chariot, I was dressed in precious apparel and I wore an elegant hairstyle. All of it had to be removed. A designated priestess helped me to clothe myself in a modest "Delphic" dress. She formed my hair into a long braid. Now I came forward toward Apollo, accompanied

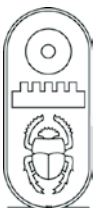
by the high priest. We entered the Temple of Apollo and went on to the middle of the adyton. Then I bowed in front of Apollo's statue and I waited. The god answered through an augural flash of light. He adopted me as his own prophetic.

"You will be interpenetrated by pythonic powers of Apollo. You will speak by his voice," Kleio, the chief Pythia told our group of four women. Her words were related to our future role as priestesses. Kleio taught us, preparing us to be Pythias. Before we took on this role, however, we had to make a vow of devotion to the God Apollo. We were crowned with laurel, and all of us kept at our hands a clay finger bowl. The high priest used water from the bowl to pour on our heads. This act symbolized purification and eligibility for duty as Pythias.

Future priestesses of Apollo did not pass through special training or practice, with the exception of the necessary basic preparation led by Kleio. Rituals and other procedures, were learned in the doing. Actually, some



Claude Lorrain, *Delphi with an Offering Procession*, seventeenth century.



Pythias already had transcendental abilities. Nevertheless, most of them developed these skills after years of living at Delphi and practice, if the god Apollo decided to bless them. Although prophetesses did not always visit a Delphic mystery school, some of them taught there, if they were competent.

I was very happy at Delphi. Usually I rose at dawn and I gave thanks to God. Pythias spent most of their days in the temple area engaged in common activities, namely in divine worship and work (care for laundry, and so on). Sometimes we set out to travel down to the nearby gulf coast where we bathed.

The preparation for “the day of Apollo,” the day when the Oracle answered questions from pilgrims by foretelling the future or by revealing the hidden present, was above all a collective experience. Each of the priestesses had to be in very good health. Pythias had no contact with the outside world, including residents of the temple area, during their preparation. They were charged to abstain from foods and beverages for at least a day before. At that time they drank only water from sacred Delphic springs. The Prophetesses then purified themselves in the holy waters. They prayed, they invoked, and they sang sacred choral songs as well. The allocation of each priestess and her role at the divination were determined by lot.

Generally, the Oracle’s prophecy to common people was much simpler and much briefer than to rich and powerful people. All supplicants were separated by a curtain from the adyton in the sanctuary of the Temple of Apollo. The Pythia sat on a tripod in the adyton and breathed the pneuma (vapors) rising from a cleft in the floor of the inner sanctum. A priest acted as a mediator between the petitioner (or petitioners) and the Oracle. He passed on their questions to her.

Then, in case of a common pilgrim, the Pythia rose to the supernal condition of consciousness. She identified with the petitioner

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for a period of time, and she interpenetrated the petitioner’s personality. In this way, the Oracle recognized each petitioner’s intention and she knew what was most beneficial for them. She answered each question in terms of this intuition. The Pythias rotated after every consultation. The first prophetess left the adyton because she needed to rest and to breathe in fresh air. She was immediately replaced by another priestess.

The consultations for rich and powerful people were quite complicated. The Oracle’s prophecies included some rituals which differed according to the nature of the question. The Pythia had to sit on the tripod and breathe the pneuma much longer. In this way she rose to the most supernal condition of consciousness. In other words, she entered into ecstatic union with Apollo. In this condition, the Oracle saw tableaux or fragments of tableaux regarding future possibilities. That is why there were ambiguous prophecies at times. The Pythia was not able to make a definitive answer because, for example, she saw a ruined town, however she did not know if it was a “friendly” or “unfriendly” town for the petitioner. Of course, there were many cases when Apollo spoke unambiguously and the Pythia interpreted his voice only.

I spent almost three decades at Delphi. In the second half of my time there, I became chief Pythia for a few years. Then a younger woman succeeded me. During the last years of my life I retired to my own home. I died when I was about sixty-five years old. I remembered kindly the Oracle of Delphi up to the end of my life because Delphi was the true purpose of my life.