

REVIEW

NARRATIVE AND STORYTELLING IN DELPHIC ORACLES

Julia Kindt, *Revisiting Delphi: Religion and Storytelling in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge Classical Studies. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xv + 215. Hardback, £67.99/\$105.00. ISBN 978-1-107-15157-4.

In this short monograph, a heavily revised version of the author's PhD thesis, Julia Kindt explores multiple stories in a variety of ancient Greek literary sources that appeal to the Delphic oracle, from historiography to tragedy to travel-writing. The book's central argument is that oracle stories are firmly embedded in Greek religious practices, and that a suite of ancient Greek writers encourage readers to move dynamically between religion and narrative. The book thus encourages readers not to approach Delphic oracle stories from the vantage point of their so-called authenticity (i.e. whether or not they were really delivered as author *x* relates), but rather in terms of how they can help us to understand ancient Greek attitudes towards communication between the gods and mortals.

The volume is divided into five main chapters, together with an introduction, conclusion, and an appendix (which functions effectively as an additional, main chapter). In Chapter One, Kindt revisits existing scholarship on the Delphic oracle, and elaborates on her intention to read carefully a selection of Delphic oracle stories, in order to understand their narrative structure and their theological underpinnings. This is a valuable approach to the study of Delphic oracles, which avoids retelling the history of the Delphic oracle as an institution or of the site of Delphi itself (topics already well covered in recent literature),¹ and one that refuses to subject oracle stories to anachronistic categorisation or to dismiss them entirely as literary constructs.

In Chapter Two, Kindt focuses on the application of Delphic oracle stories in Herodotus' *Histories* (a work that famously makes wide reference to all kinds of divinatory behaviour). Kindt looks at a number of passages that involve Delphic oracle stories, most notably in Book I's famous Croesus *logos* (20–8), and illustrates the way that Herodotus appeals to oracle accounts in order to validate these narratives. Kindt stresses how Herodotean oracles are frequently 'enigmatic', inasmuch that the historian stresses the open-ended

¹ See, e.g., H. Bowden, *Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle: Divination and Democracy* (Cambridge, 2005); M. Scott, *Delphi: A History of the Center of the World* (Princeton, 2014).

nature of oracles and their potential meaning, and that ultimately Herodotus encourages his readers to engage in the difficulty of interpreting ambiguous oracular messages. It must be noted, of course, that not all oracles in the *Histories* are presented as in any meaningful way ‘enigmatic’, or that Herodotus suggests that they always necessitate extensive disambiguation.²

Chapter Three moves on to an analysis of Euripides’ tragic drama *Ion*, which is set at Delphi. While the *Ion* is a tragedy, and thus not bound by the same generic expectations as a work like Herodotus’ *Histories*, Kindt shows how the motif of the ‘enigmatic’ oracle recurs in Euripides’ play, which centres on the drama that unfolds from its main characters’ confusion over a set of riddling Delphic prophecies. She also demonstrates clearly the way in which Euripides’ plot refuses to resolve satisfactorily all the elements of Apollo’s messages. As with Herodotus, Euripides encourages his audience to understand the complexity of human–divine communication, and the difficulties faced when interpreting ambiguous oracular language.

Chapter Four turns to a third text from the classical period: Plato’s *Apology*. Here Kindt assesses Plato’s famous account of Socrates’ defence speech from 399 BCE, in which Socrates announces that the Delphic oracle had instructed his friend Chaerephon that nobody was wiser than Socrates (he does not quote the oracle verbatim). Unsurprisingly, Socrates does not rush to any conclusions about the true meaning of this message, but rather he attempts to understand its true meaning. Thus the pattern from the preceding two chapters has been reversed: while figures such as Herodotus’ Croesus and Euripides’ Xuthus prove to be unaware of the enigmatic mode in which the oracle ‘speaks’, Plato’s Socrates demonstrates a formidable appreciation of oracular discourse, which so often proves elusive in ancient Greek literature. As is well known, Socrates failed to persuade the Athenian jurors of his innocence; it would be interesting to know what they made of his oracle story: cf. Kindt’s suggestion that ‘Perhaps they even took his references to Delphi as just another attempt by a human being to manipulate the oracular for his own purposes?’ (111).

Having explored three instances of oracle stories (with a largely Athenian bias) from the classical period, Kindt moves forward in time to consider further examples that date to the Roman imperial period. Chapter Five investigates the fascinating account of Theagenes of Thasos in Pausanias’ *Description of Greece* (6.11.2–9). In particular, Kindt examines the implications of an oracle delivered to the Thasians, advising them ‘to take back the exiles’ (καταδέχεσθαι τοὺς δεδιωγμένους, 118). This advice is connected with the Thasians’ earlier action of putting a statue of Theagenes on trial for homicide, eventually throwing the statue into the sea. The discussion then goes on to show how

² On Herodotean oracles, see T. Harrison, *Divinity and History: The Religion of Herodotus* (Oxford, 2000) 125–57.

oracle stories illustrate ‘the manifestation of the divine and its materialisation in the human sphere through statues, oracles and omens’ (125).

The final core chapter of this book looks at an account concerning Parmeniscus of Metapontum, taken from Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistae*, although ultimately derived from Semus’ *History of Delos*. In this oracle story, Parmeniscus (who has lost the ability to laugh) consults the oracle, only to be told that ‘the mother will give it to you at home’ (δώσει σοι μήτηρ οἴκοι, 132). The discussion moves on to explore Parmeniscus’ unexpected laughter upon the sight of the cult statue of Leto on the island of Delos, highlighting the fluid space between the religious gaze and a more secular kind of visuality in the ancient Greek world, as well as the complexity of human efforts to apprehend ‘the divine as it manifests itself in the human sphere’ (151). After concluding her study, Kindt provides one additional case study on Plutarch’s *The E at Delphi*. The discussion is centred on Plutarch’s analysis of the inherently ambiguous letter E, which could be found at the temple of Apollo in Delphi.

There is much to admire about this book. First and foremost, Kindt’s subtle readings help us appreciate the religious dimension of oracle stories; for these accounts reveal much about wider Greek attitudes towards the divine.³ The book also highlights the ambiguity and coded or ‘enigmatic’ quality of myriad oracles from the ancient Greek world (Kindt refers to ‘the infamously enigmatic language of the oracle’ at 157), as manifested in a wide array of genres. That being said, it would have been equally possible to analyse various contexts in which oracle stories are rather more straightforward, and the complexities of correct interpretation are less pronounced. And while the Delphic oracle played a distinct rôle in ancient Greek society, there were, of course, various other oracle sites in the Greek world; it remains to be seen how oracle stories originating from one of these other locations fit into the overall picture of religion and storytelling in ancient Greece.

As much as it is heartening to see such a nuanced approach towards the reading of oracle stories, it must be admitted that (and despite Kindt’s method of reading each story against ‘the rules and conventions of the larger genre of which it was apart’ (156)) difficult questions remain concerning certain oracles and their relationship with a ‘historical’ reality. This would not be true of course for an oracle such as that presented in Euripides’ *Ion*, which makes no claims about any ‘real’ past, but it is certainly relevant in the context of Herodotus’ *Histories*, a historiographical work that is (self-admittedly)⁴ bound

³ For a different approach, which also sets out to understand Greek attitudes towards divination (albeit from a cognitive perspective), see P. T. Struck, *Divination and Human Nature: A Cognitive History of Intuition in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton and Oxford, 2016).

⁴ At 2.116.1, Herodotus relates that Homer knew the true story of Helen’s whereabouts during the Trojan War, but that he did not consider the true story ‘suitable’ (εὐπρεπής) for

by different generic expectations than those of (for example) tragedy or philosophy. After all, it is an inescapable truth that many readers remain troubled by oracle accounts such as those ostensibly delivered by the Delphic oracle to Herodotus' Croesus.⁵ What's more, while the wide selection of sources takes the reader from classical Athens to Roman imperial era Chaeronea, there is no coverage of material from the Greek world between these periods. Indeed, Kindt admits that 'more research is certainly needed to unveil further dimensions within these narratives' (168)—a modest acknowledgement that more is to be done on the narrative structure of oracle stories, and their reflection of (changing?) attitudes towards the gods across the history of the ancient Greek world.

This is nevertheless a valuable contribution to the study of the Delphic oracle, Greek religion, and the narrative structures that underlie ancient Greek literature. It will be of special interest not only to those interested in the history of Delphi or divination, but more broadly to anyone with an interest in ancient Greek religion or ancient Greek literature.

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his poem; the corollary of this is that Herodotus is guided by a different set of criteria vis-à-vis the narrative presentation of his source material.

⁵ See further P. Thonemann, 'Croesus and the Oracles', *JHS* 136 (2016) 152–67.