Ancient Authority: Degrees of Separation

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The study of ancient history employs a method of evidence examination unique among academic disciplines. Most of our evidence is limited, coming down to us in mere fragments or partial inscriptions, often passing through the hands of several authors, and subject to the peculiarities of various methods, motivations, and languages. The nature of this evidence is often difficult to untangle and, out of necessity, we take upon ourselves, as scholars of ancient history, the authority to interpret the meagre evidence that remains from antiquity. As Robert Lamberton has noted, constructing the evidence from antiquity exposes the ‘frailty of the chain that links us to the truth’ (149). Likewise, the ancient authors themselves had limited evidence of the past, separating us again from the actuality of history. However, these degrees of separation do not altogether prevent us from interpreting the fragmentary evidence and constructing a picture of the past that is unique with every generation that the sources shed light on.

This paper will analyse the authority of Plutarch, one of the best-qualified sources concerning the Delphic oracle, my personal focus of research, by examining three of his dialogues concerning Delphi, tracing his authority from the sources he uses, the use of his work through the centuries, and to the interpretation of modern scholars today.

Delphi was the seat of the most renowned oracle of Apollo in Ancient Greece. Consulted for centuries by Greeks and non-Greeks alike on various matters ranging from state legislation to personal concerns such as marriage; it became a religious and political authority for all of Greece. The Pythia, the priestess responsible for uttering these prophecies, had a reputation in antiquity for ambiguity. Her responses were often imbued with a vague and obscure character, recorded in both verse and prose, and this uncertainty, in a way, parallels the nature of our evidence from Ancient Greece. These prophecies come down to us from various sources, dozens of ancient authors, some centuries apart, as well as inscriptions at the site. The inscriptions themselves are less common than the extant literary sources, and usually cannot, by themselves, lend any substantive insight without the support of a literary source to afford context. On the other hand, the literary sources’ validity is strengthened by the confirmation of inscriptive evidence, as we shall see.

Plutarch is seen as one of the most reliable sources concerning Delphi, as he was himself a priest there in the Second Century CE (Lamberton 52). Here we have an example of inscriptive evidence confirmed by a literary source: we know he was a priest at the sanctuary from an inscription (C.I.G. 1713) dedicating a statue of Hadrian. In addition, some of Plutarch’s passing comments in his works confirm his status at Delphi. This first-hand knowledge of the site firmly establishes Plutarch’s credibility relative to other ancient authors who did not visit
the place personally. Even the authors who did travel to Delphi are less reliable than Plutarch, since he resided at the sanctuary, which would give him intimate knowledge of the site. Additionally, being a priest, he would have privileged knowledge of the rituals and workings of the temple. Plutarch was a native of Boeotia; his hometown was Chaeronea, just miles from Delphi. This birthplace sets him firmly in mainland Greece, but the context of the Second Century CE makes him distinctly Roman, as by this time the Empire had taken over all of Greece. This is an important detail to keep in mind, as his culture was becoming more Romanised than it had been in previous centuries. His audience, the educated Graeco-Roman elite, would have been fluent in both Greek and Latin. Plutarch’s writings were affected to some degree by his readers: this high-class audience was well-read, and Plutarch would have been careful to avoid any contradictions or falsehoods. Since his audience would have been familiar with much of the same literature Plutarch himself relied on, he could assume his readers’ knowledge of the more common ideas. Plutarch would have taken his audience’s awareness of some general facts for granted and omitted them in his work; consequently, they have become lost to us. Plutarch himself was in a similar situation: as we will see with one of his essays, much of the common knowledge of the past was already lost to him.

Plutarch’s extant writings are numerous and the subject matter varies considerably. His most famous works are the parallel Lives, in which he pairs a famous Greek with a Roman counterpart, giving comparative biographies. His less-read work, misleadingly dubbed Moralia, covers subject matter ranging from correct behaviour at dinner parties, ethical considerations, and Platonic metaphysics. Three of the essays in Moralia, called the ‘Pythian Dialogues,’ concern the Delphic oracle. Set at Delphi, they deal specifically with the changing practices at Delphi in Plutarch’s time.

The first essay is The E at Delphi, which delves into the origin of the representation of the mysterious symbol ‘E’ at the sanctuary. Besides the well-known inscriptions at Delphi, (‘Know Thyself,’ ‘Nothing in Excess,’ etc.), Plutarch mentions the existence of the letter E inscribed on Apollo’s temple, and on the omphalos stone. Plutarch searches for the meaning of this letter, and proposes, via the speakers in his dialogue, seven possible explanations for its continuing use.

Lamprias, Plutarch’s brother, maintains that it was dedicated by the Wise Men, called the Sophists, to ‘show that they were actually five in number, instead of three: Chilon, Thales, Solon, Bias, and Pittacus,’ (Mor. 385 E). The Greeks used their letters to signify numbers, epsilon (E), the fifth letter in the alphabet, signifying five. A second suggestion: ‘someone else among those present said that all this was similar to the nonsense which the Chaldean visitor had uttered a short time before,’ i.e. that E is the second vowel, and the sun is the second planet, and Apollo is identified with the sun (386 B). That Plutarch keeps the speaker anonymous suggests that Plutarch does not consider this the most valid explanation, especially since he refers to it as ‘nonsense’. The third suggestion is offered by Nicander, who claims that this is the opinion of the Delphians themselves: that E means ‘if’ and people ask the oracle if they should do one thing or another (386 C). Plutarch gives credence to this theory when he mentions that Nicander is also a priest at Delphi. The fourth rationalisation is similar to the
that E is used in wishes or prayers to the god, *if only I could,* again referring to the consultation of Apollo (386 D). The next explanation becomes the beginning of a tangent, that E (‘if’) is a common phrase in logic, especially when constructing a syllogism, so E would again mean ‘if’ (387 C). Theon, Plutarch’s friend and a recurring character in the dialogues, asserts that logical syllogism is the highest form of logic and separates mankind from the animals, and he convolutedly connects this logic with the prophecy of Apollo. Eustrophus, an otherwise unknown character, offers another rationalisation—that five is the most beautiful and important number in mathematics, philosophy, and music (388 D-391 E). Plutarch takes over the conversation from there, and his Pythagorean philosophy is quite apparent as he and his friends discuss the beauty of the number five for several pages. Finally, Ammonius, Plutarch’s teacher, suggests that E can also mean ‘thou art’ in Ancient Greek and is the address of Apollo by the consultant (392 A).

The significant aspect of this essay as it concerns us here is that even Plutarch himself, a priest at the sanctuary, did not fully know the explanation for this mysterious representation, the meaning of which is lost to time. This presents us with an even bigger knot to untie, since the evidence we have comprises two coins depicting the E (Imhoof-Blumer & Gardner 119), and Plutarch’s dialogue. The most plausible explanation, offered by Bates in 1925, suggests that the E had its origins in Minoan culture, since the earliest representation dates to the Seventh Century BCE, and Delphi was inhabited by Minoan denizens before Apollo took over the sanctuary (239-246). Scholars are still not in agreement, and there are several other modern suggestions for the origin of the E (see Griffiths; Roscher; Lagercrantz). Our vain attempts to uncover a verifiable truth seem useless in this instance, and the answer remains as obscure now as it was to Plutarch in his day.

*The Oracles at Delphi* is Plutarch’s second essay concerning the sanctuary. The speakers in this dialogue are Basilocles, Philinus, Diogenianus, Theon, Sarapion, and Boëthus, as well as some professional guides at Delphi. The conversation serves to investigate the changing of a major custom at Delphi, namely why, during Plutarch’s time, the oracles were delivered in prose where they had previously been given in verse. This is a particular problem for Plutarch, as for modern historians. Most of the extant oracles in other sources are in verse form, for example Herodotus 7.140, while others are only testimonies (Xen. *Anab.* 3.1.5-8.) or in simple prose (Demosthenes 43.66). It seems that even Plutarch did not know the answer to these difficult questions of ritual change. Like *The E at Delphi,* this essay also deals with theories and information that the author is merely speculating on. Sarapion, the poet of the group, raises the question: if these responses were really from Apollo, why would their beauty ‘fall short of the verses of Homer and Hesiod?’ (396 D). Boëthus, a mathematician and Epicurean, answers this question by insisting that although it is the god who creates these prophecies, they merely come through the voice of the Pythia. He compares this to written oracles, offering the analogy that the handwriting was not the gods’ but simply the medium of the god’s message (397 B-C). Theon offers his opinion that the oracles given in verse concerned very important matters, such as colonisation, whereas the less important ones were in prose. In addition, he mentions that most literature of the day is now in prose, perhaps for the sake of clarity and people’s
preference in writing (403 A-B). It is suggested, however, that those ideas communicated through verse are better remembered and more firmly kept in mind (407 F), showing that the Greeks themselves knew the power of their oral traditions. Theon dominates the rest of the discussion, and the essay ends by reiterating his theory: the oracles are no longer given in verse because the issues presented to the god are not as complicated as those of previous centuries.

There is, in fact, profound peace and tranquility; war has ceased, there are no wanderings of peoples, no civil strifes, no despotisms, nor other maladies and ills in Greece requiring many unusual remedial forces (408 B-C).

Since the discussion ends there, it seems that Plutarch is satisfied with the conclusion, yet the answer to this question still troubles modern scholars. It is noteworthy that most male historians today think that the responses were given in prose and subsequently recorded in hexameter by male priests; their female counterparts argue that it was the Pythia herself who issued both hexameter and prose. An alternative modern opinion is that many of the responses recorded in hexameter are oral traditions, preserved first by word of mouth, and then later written down (Maurizio 308-334). It is unclear which extant responses adhere to this category, and different modern scholars have different parameters to determine the historicity of each response (see Fontenrose; Parke & Wormell).

The Obsolescence of Oracles or The Disappearance of Oracles is Plutarch’s final extant essay on Delphi. In this essay, Lamprias, Demetrius, Cleombrotus, Ammonius, Philip, Didymus, and Heracleon are engaged in a debate at Delphi, trying to understand why, by their time, many of the oracles in Greece have begun to decline. One of the issues raised is why there is only one Pythia in service of the temple, whereas in former times there were three priestesses, two active and one held in reserve. Twenty-nine folio-pages later, that question seems a mere side-note to the digressions into philosophy and metaphysics, complicating the task of interpreting and isolating specific information. Ammonius offers his reason for the decline—the depopulation of Greece: fewer priestesses are needed because fewer people are consulting Apollo (413 F- 414 A). The next theory is given by Heracleon: ‘That it is not the gods…who are in charge of the oracles, since the gods ought properly to be freed of earthly concerns; but that it is the demigods (daemons), ministers to the gods, who have them in charge…’ (418 E). Since the daemons are not immortal, they die and the oracular shrines die with them, and, to highlight the point, Philip gives the example of the death of Pan (419 C). Daemons are a popular issue in Greek philosophy, and Socrates himself purported to have had his own personal demigod. This issue segues into other interesting topics—geometry, geography, astronomy, and metaphysics—but, sadly for my purposes, the dialogue does not make a clear judgment on the initial subject. These tangents confuse the matter, and in the end the issue is still not resolved, as Lamprias says:

These matters…I urge upon you for your frequent consideration, as well as my own, in the belief that they contain much to which objections might be made, and many suggestions looking to a contrary conclusion, all for which the present occasion does not allow us to follow out. (438 D-E)

The characters in the discussion, once again, cannot come to a sound conclusion, leaving us with little by way of certainty. The dialogue technique used by Plutarch
is convoluted, but, as we shall see, also a clever way of presenting the information without spoiling the secrets of the sanctuary.

Of the 70-odd preserved pieces of *Moralia*, sixteen are in dialogue form. This is a standard technique in philosophical writings, and it is clear that Plutarch takes Plato as his model in the genre, although it was Socrates who invented this form. This literary style makes the authority of certain passages difficult to determine. Since dialogues put information into the mouths of others, often refuted by the next character, it is hard to determine which account Plutarch expects or desires the reader to believe. The fact that he records them at all suggests that several sides may be, to some degree, acceptable to him. On the other hand, he often presents information simply to refute it. Perhaps this is his undisclosed way of supporting what he considers the more valid side of the argument, making a straw man out of the less likely explanations, as we saw in *The Delphi* and the ‘nonsense’ suggestion. In addition to the form of composition Plutarch uses, it is also often difficult to determine the sources he himself used. Although he may mention which speaker gives certain information, he does not necessarily cite, or even know, the origin of what the character maintains.

Typically, in most of his dialogues, the ‘I’ speaking seems to be Plutarch, as one can see when he refers to ‘my friend’ or ‘my brother,’ but in *The Disappearance of Oracles* the ‘I’ appears to be Lamprias, with Plutarch seemingly absent from the discussion. Plutarch could use this approach to protect the secrets of the sanctuary, as the technique seems deliberate on his part. A good example of this occurs in one section of *The Delphi*, where, sadly, the Greek text is uncertain (Polybius trans. Babbitt 237). Plutarch says,

> On the sixth day of the new month, namely, when the prophetic priestess is conducted down to the Prytaneum, the first of your three sortitions is for five, she casting three and you casting two, each with reference to the other. Is this not actually so? (391 D-E).

To which Nicander responds, ‘Yes…but the reason must not be told to others’ (391 E). This intentional silence of those with religious experience parallels the workings of the Eleusinian Mysteries, another secret cult in Ancient Greece, and makes the interpretation even more difficult (417 B-C). This apparently deliberate omission precludes fact-checking and creates even more problems in deducing the source material. To circumvent this problem, it may be more valuable to recognise Plutarch’s motives for such an omission and acknowledge them within the appropriate context of his writings; or, perhaps it is useful to see this form as a stylised metaphor for the ambiguity of the Delphic oracle, paralleling the difficulty and frustration of interpreting the oracles uttered by the Pythia, alluding to the nature of knowledge itself.

Besides the speakers in the dialogue, Plutarch does cite other sources, and it is clear that he is much more familiar with the Greek sources than the Latin. In *Moralia*, Plutarch cites Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon as his authorities for some of the information he relays. In addition, he mentions the works of Ephorus, Timaeus, Polybius, and Theopompos, among others. His use of Timaeus is a prime example of the difficulty of teasing out the truth from the fiction in ancient sources. Although Plutarch cites and uses the work of Timaeus, Polybius criticises Timaeus’ errors, especially concerning Africa, Corsica and Locri.
(Polybius Bk 6). Sadly, most of the original is lost so we cannot make up our minds for ourselves. These contradicting opinions on sources do not necessarily negate Plutarch’s reliability, for in other instances, Plutarch is critical of many of his sources.

This awareness of his sources can be seen in his treatise On Herodotus’ Spite, which has been called the ‘first instance in literature of the slashing review’ (Barrow 157). Plutarch offers here a book-by-book systematic survey of Herodotus’ work, accusing Herodotus of creating prejudice in his audience. This shows that Plutarch was mindful of his sources, and was aware that historians and writers could have their own agenda and resources for their works. This is yet another reason the authority of Plutarch can be trusted. It must be said, however, that hyper-patriotism is evident in his critique of Herodotus, as he will not accept any criticism of Sparta or Argos in the Persian wars and is obviously biased towards the Greeks.

Plutarch remains our best authority for the history of the Delphic oracle, as well as the procedure at the sanctuary. But even with this first-hand knowledge, Plutarch did not give away all the secrets of the oracle, if he knew them himself. This is the character of ancient history: the authors did not necessarily anticipate their audience two thousand years in the future, and we are left with the daunting task of reconstructing some sort of picture of the past through this broken chain of authority. Additionally, the confusion is compounded by the fact that not all of the information has been preserved throughout the ages and even the ones that have survived often come in fragmentary form, or contradict one another. This is the nature of the chain that links us to the truth of history, if such a truth exists. That historical essence is lost forever, and the only things that bridge our understanding are these meagre sources. That may seem overwhelming and pointless to some, but this is the beauty of the discipline, the art of interpretation and the mystery that surrounds the happenings of the past. We grant ourselves the authority to interpret these passages from the past; if not brought to life by this chain of sources, history would be a much darker, more mysterious place.
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