

## Visual Images of the Pythia at Delphi: A Priestess at Work

In ancient literary sources, Apollo's priestess at Delphi, the Pythia, issued oracles in verse and prose to answer clients' questions. Yet, there is no scholarly consensus that the Pythia, not priests, composed oracles and directly reported them to clients (Flower 2008 argues she did *contra* Bowden 2005). Further some scholars argue that the Pythia regularly used lots, either beans or stones, tossed about in a container to answer clients' questions (Johnston 2008 argues she did *contra* Fontenrose 1978). To support the argument that the Pythia used lots to answer clients' questions, one piece of visual evidence is frequently cited: an Attic red-figure kylix by Kodros (*LIMC* I.2 Aigeus no. 1; Avramidou 2011: 39–40). Here a woman, labeled Themis, sits on a tripod, holding a laurel branch and phiale, a flat-bottomed container, into which she stares. A man, labeled Aigeus, presumably the legendary king of Athens whom Euripides depicts visiting Delphi (*Medea* 660–868), approaches her. Kodros' vase has been interpreted as a representation of Aigeus' visit (Shapiro 1993: 221–23) that also offers evidence for reconstructing what historical Pythias did at Delphi: Themis stares at the phiale because it holds lots and by extension the Pythia used lots too. Other visual depictions of the Pythia might similarly contribute to understanding her role in divinatory consultation. Yet, these have not been collected or examined. This presentation offers the beginning of a collection and examination of vases that represent the Pythia that might shed light on her activities at Delphi.

Many depictions of the Pythia occur in representations of the first scene in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* on vases from Southern Italy (e.g. *LIMC* VII.2 Orestes 29 and *LIMC* VII.2 Orestes 51). These vases show a frightened Pythia fleeing the Furies who have invaded her temple. On two of these, the Pythia is labeled Mantikleia and Manto, names that express her oracular duties: (*LIMC* III.2 Erinyes 51 and *LIMC* VI.2 Manto 2 with Taplin 2007: 19). On the vase where the

Pythia is labeled Manto, she holds a phiale, as on Kodros' vase. Another female, most likely a priestess, accompanies her; other depictions also show more than one priestess at Delphi (i.e. *LIMC* VII.2 Orestes 18).

While these vases must be treated with a degree of caution—they refer loosely to Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, and not to divinatory practices at Delphi—they nonetheless offer some information about the Pythia's appearance (i.e. age, clothing, hair, etc.) and place among other officials at Delphi. Such information may be useful when compared to or added to accounts of the Pythia that rely solely on literary evidence. For example, Diodorus Siculus (16.26) states that after a virginal Pythia was raped, the women chosen to serve in this role were old and past childbearing age; nonetheless they dressed as virgins. Do any vases depict an elderly Pythia dressed as a virgin and thereby corroborate Diodorus Siculus' account? Herodotus reports that at any given time there was more than one priestess at Dodona (2.55). Might evidence from vases suggest that there was more than one Pythia at Delphi? This collection and review of vases that depict the Pythia will address these and related questions, and thereby contribute to literary evidence used in scholarly arguments about the Pythia's role at Delphi.

### Bibliography

- Avramidou, A. 2011. *The Codrus Painter: Iconography and Reception of Athenian Vases in the Age of Pericles*. Madison.
- Bowden, H. 2005. *Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle: Divination and Democracy*. Cambridge UK.
- Flower, M. A. 2008. *The Seer in Ancient Greece*. Berkeley and Los Angeles.
- Fontenrose, J. 1978. *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations with a Catalogue of its*

*Responses*. Berkeley and Los Angeles.

Johnston, S. I. 2008. *Ancient Greek Divination*. Malden and Chichester.

*LIMC: Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*. Zürich, München and Düsseldorf,  
1981-1999.

Shapiro, H.A. 1993. *Personifications in Greek Art: The Representation of Abstract Concepts  
600–400 BC*. Zurich.

Taplin, O. 2007. *Pots & Plays: Interactions between Tragedy and Greek Vase-painting of the  
Fourth Century B.C.* Los Angeles.