

**The Sacred and the Cynical: the Delphic Oracle
and International Relations in Ancient Greece**

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It is a truism with which students of antiquity are painfully familiar: the world of the ancient Greek city-states was a politically divided one, rife with endemic conflict that never seemed to find a solution. In spite of their common heritage of Hellenism – of language, of religion, of culture – the Greeks never found peace amongst themselves unless it was imposed from without. The threat of a massive Persian invasion might force them into a (temporary) co-operation; the might of Rome could deny them their traditional military outlets and enforce mediated solutions to their disputes. But left to themselves, the Greeks repeatedly chose military means to resolve – or to perpetuate – their conflicts. Did the Greeks not desire a peaceful co-existence? Of course they did. In fact, the Greeks are often touted as the founders of the phenomenon of interstate arbitration. While it may be claiming too much to assert that the Greeks *invented* the idea of mediated solution to international conflict, they certainly did turn to it regularly. But there were often many barriers that impeded this route, and outstanding among them was the question, *who would act as mediator?*

This question often stopped the process of mediation or arbitration dead in its tracks. For instance, in the early 4th century BC, when Athens and Sparta were (yet again) embroiled in conflict, Athens suggested to Sparta that they resolve their differences through arbitration, and proposed that the city-state of Megara could act as a third party to mediate their quarrel. But Megara was a small and relatively insignificant state, nowhere near the level of prestige and power enjoyed by both Sparta and Athens. Sparta's King Agesipolis responded to the Athenian suggestion with indignation and contempt. He argued that Sparta could never accept Megara as an arbiter of her affairs, since that would imply that the Megarians knew more about honour and justice than the Spartans did. (The problem is an eternal one. In the 19th century, when the Americans accused the British of supporting confederate privateering, the British initially refused to consider international arbitration as a means of resolving their differences, on the grounds that "Her Majesty's government was the sole guardian of its own honour.") Prior to the outbreak of the greatest Greek conflict of them all, the Peloponnesian War, Sparta and Athens had actually formulated a treaty that bound them to go to arbitration should any future differences arise

between them. Yet when that conflict was imminent, in 432 BC, Athenian proposals of arbitration were roundly rejected. In the bipolar atmosphere of the 5th century, with most of the Greek world divided into two camps dominated by Sparta and Athens, who could possibly have had the stature to judge between them?

Yet there was, throughout Greek history, an entity that might be thought to have been of sufficient prestige to have acted as arbitrator of all of Hellas's quarrels. The Delphic oracle was a truly Panhellenic institution. Apollo spoke to all the Greeks, and was venerated by them in turn. His prestige extended even beyond the Greek world and impressed such powers as Kroisos of Lydia. The oracle was a clearing-house of international affairs – representatives of all the Greek states passed through here seeking responses to queries on matters large and small, public and private. Apollo dispensed advice and offered commentary on colonization, political constitutions, religious observance, and military campaigns. Why then did the Greeks not turn to him regularly to resolve their quarrels in a peaceable fashion?

There are many and various possible answers, but a clue to one of them appears in the account of the one and only clear case of an oracular interstate arbitration. In 383 BC the two Ionian city-states of Kymai and Klazomenai were arguing over the possession of a third community, Leuke. At first they sought to settle their differences by war, but then both sides agreed to turn the matter over to Delphi to resolve. Not surprisingly, the oracle took a religious viewpoint in its response. Leuke had an Apollo temple, and the god told the Kymaians and Klazomenians that the territory should go to whichever side was the first, on a particular day, to conduct a sacrifice at Leuke. Both parties were to set out on that morning from their own community, and the Kymaians, who lived closer to Leuke, were certain that they now had the upper hand. The Klazomenians, however, sent out a number of men from their own town ahead of time to found a temporary settlement, not far from Leuke itself and closer to it than Kymai was. When the day came, the Klazomenians were therefore able to depart from this "colony" (claiming that it was indeed part of their state), and so arrived at Leuke and carried out the sacrifice before the Kymaians could get there.

The god never chastised the Klazomenians for this trick and for their cynical approach to the oracular judgement; they won the day and the

arbitration. Indeed, their actions were in many respects in the same spirit as some of Apollo's own words. Apollo Loxias regularly expected his appellants to read beneath the surface of his obscure messages and divine the convolutions therein – if they did not, then they were responsible for their own failure or destruction. The most famous of all the oracular responses from Delphi is surely that delivered to Kroisos of Lydia: "If you cross the River Halys, you will destroy a mighty empire." When Kroisos thereupon attacked Cyrus of Persia and was defeated and lost his kingdom, he not unnaturally complained to Delphi. Apollo rightly, but with what was surely a rather unreasonable lack of sympathy, pointed out to Kroisos that he should have asked which empire.

The story is a wryly humorous one (provided you are not one of the players), and no doubt served a didactic purpose, warning its hearers of the dangers of accepting anything at face value. But the irony and ambiguity of so many of the Delphic god's responses no doubt prompted an answering sentiment in those mere humans who consulted the oracle. As we can see in the Kymai-Klazomenai arbitration, what was important – to the god and to the Klazomenians – was the fulfillment of a certain act, not the spirit in which that act was carried out. The Greeks invented Cynicism, after all. That same Agesipolis who was so incensed at the slur cast on Sparta's reputation for honour by the Athenian suggestion that Megara could judge between them was himself responsible for an outrageously cynical manipulation of oracular consultation. Determined to attack the state of Argos, yet repeatedly defeated by constant and inconvenient Argive declarations of a sacred truce, Agesipolis went to Olympia and asked the oracle of Zeus whether he was justified in attacking anyway, as the Argives were only declaring the sacred armistice whenever the Spartans were about to attack, not when the calendar demanded it. Zeus said yes, and Agesipolis then proceeded straight to the (evidently more prestigious?) oracle of Zeus's son at Delphi, and without any further clarification simply asked Apollo "if he was in agreement with his father regarding the sacred truce". Since Zeus was the king of the gods, and Apollo was his son, and since the question was so generic in form, the Delphic oracle could hardly answer otherwise than in the affirmative, and Agesipolis went on his merry way to attack Argos in spite of all the Argive pleadings that this was an impious act. The Spartan king had given the oracle a taste of its own medicine.

On the eve of the Peloponnesian War, when Athens proposed that she and Sparta submit their differences to arbitration, Sparta turned a deaf ear to

the proposals. Yet Athens and Sparta had a treaty between them that called for arbitration of exactly such matters as are presented by Thucydides as the precipitating causes of the war. We know too that Sparta eventually felt guilty about refusing arbitration, and believed that she had incurred the anger of the gods by doing so. Although Sparta won the Peloponnesian War in the end, it was a long and terrible struggle for both sides, and Sparta was convinced that her suffering had been prolonged because of this refusal. But what is deeply ironic about the Spartan refusal to consider arbitration in 432 is that at the time Sparta had the support of Delphi: when the Spartans consulted the oracle on whether or not they should go to war, the god informed them that they would ultimately be victorious, and that he was on their side whether they asked him to be or not. Under the circumstances we might have expected Sparta, particularly under the leadership of that reluctant warrior Archidamos, to leap at Athens' offer, and suggest the Delphic oracle as a possible arbitrator. But Apollo had argued for war rather than peace. The "Panhellenic" voice of the god argued not for compromise, mediation, and negotiation, but rather for the military subjugation of one Greek state by another. While Athens might be excused for being cynical about the efficacy of negotiations under such an umbrella, it is more surprising – and perhaps more telling – that Sparta was the one who rejected the notion of arbitration. War was a better bet than peace – the god had said so. So while the Greeks abhorred the destruction of war (no one who reads the *Iliad* can think otherwise), they nevertheless accepted it as an inevitable part of the experience of this world. Indeed, men might protest the necessity of war, but the gods appeared to support it. Pacifism was not yet recognized as a realizable goal of human political life. It is therefore not surprising to find cynicism about mediated solutions to conflict as the prevailing sentiment, and to find that mere humans were forced to submit to the superior will (if not the wisdom) of the gods in this matter as in so many others.