

## Delphi: The Navel of the Earth

by

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Greek legend records that once Zeus wanted to discover the exact centre of the earth. Being logically inclined, the King of the Gods set one speedy eagle at the eastern edge of the world, and a second eagle (equally speedy) at the western edge; when Zeus gave the signal, the two eagles flew towards each other, and eventually met (head-on) over Delphi. At that moment, Delphi became "the navel of the earth" and one of the most sacred places in ancient Greece.

It was here, overlooking a limitless sea of olive trees, that Apollo decided to build his temple. Coming from his birthplace on the island of Delos, Apollo slew the monstrous python that lived at Delphi and established his cult and oracle right on the flank of Mt. Parnassos. The seat of the oracle was within the Temple of Apollo itself, where a deep fissure in the ground sent forth peculiar fumes; the priestess of Apollo would chew a laurel leaf, and then sit down over the fissure to breathe in the fumes. The process seems to have thrown her into an hallucinatory state in which she uttered incoherent sounds; however, there were priests in attendance to "clarify" her predictions for the puzzled inquirers.

To this oracle came kings and peasants alike, all eager to learn what Fate had in store. Unfortunately, the replies of the oracle were often ambiguous: for example, once Croesus, the King of Lydia, wanted to attack his rival, King Cyrus of Persia. Croesus asked the oracle for advice, and received as his reply: "If Croesus crosses the river Aly, he will destroy a great kingdom." Croesus interpreted this as a sign of his impending victory and he attacked the forces of Cyrus. And the oracle did indeed come true: Croesus' forces were destroyed by Cyrus and "a great kingdom" was destroyed, namely the kingdom of Lydia!

Delphi grew powerful as a result of her oracle, and soon numerous buildings graced the sanctuary. One of the best preserved today is the theatre, built in the 4th century B.C. and still used for dramatic performances. There was also a stadium that could hold 7000 spectators; this stadium became the focal point of the Pythian Games, a panhellenic athletic competition that, like the Olympics, was held every four years. Smaller structures included several "treasuries" constructed by various Greek city-states as repositories for their offerings to Apollo.

Delphi today, even in ruins, is certainly one of the most imposing sites in all Greece. As one stands high on Parnassos, viewing not only the mountains and gorges, but also the bay and gulf beyond, one can understand at once the deep awe that the "Navel of the Earth" inspired in the ancient Greeks. Even though the priestess and her prophecies are silent, an imposing sense of the supernatural still remains.