Stable Places and Changing Perceptions: Cave Archaeology in Greece

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“Through The Double Gates Of Sleep” (Verg. Aen. 6.236.): Cave-Oracles In Graeco-Roman Antiquity

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Introduction

In Graeco-Roman Antiquity the consultation of the divine through an oracle was the most powerful guidance a human being could get. The variety of divination rituals was countless, reaching from the interpretation of a god’s statue’s movements during a procession in ancient Egypt (Diod. Sic. 17.50-17.51) to the close examination of the eating habits of the holy chickens on the Capitol Hill in Rome (Plin. HN 10.48). While the early oracles in Egypt or the Near East were mainly connected to a particular deity or ritual, in ancient Greece they were established at specific places in nature, primarily groves, sources or caves.

While the remains of the best-known cave oracle - the vapour-covered adyton of Delphi are probably destroyed by earthquakes, many others could be reconstructed (for a classical approach to caves in Antiquity, see Ustinova 2009, also Egelaaf-Gaiser and Rüpke 2000, 155-176). In the following article I present a short overview on the archaeological and written material of cave oracles and their connected deities in Graeco-Roman Antiquity, followed by a discussion about their ritualistic use and their architectural development from Greek to Roman times.

The Case Study

The Gates To The Underworld. Death Oracle Caves In Greece And Rome

The Graeco-Roman mythology refers to several places as the entrance of the Hades, foremost in connection with the final labour of Herakles, who was sent by the king Eurystheus to capture and bring back alive Kerberos, the guard-dog to the gates of the underworld. Since the 5th century B.C. all of these places were associated with the Greek term nekyomantia, which can be translated as “place of necromancy” or “oracle of death” (Ogden 2001, xix; Friese, 2010b, 29-40). From the literary sources we also know about other nekyomantia in Phygalia in Arkadia (Plut. Mor. 555C), a Thessalic oracle (Scholiast Euripides Alkestis 1128) and the Stymphalos lake at Arkadia (Aesch. Psychagogoi F273A), but none of these places were of supraregional importance and none of them has been found so far.

The Nekyomantion Of Odysseus Near Ephyra

The first bequeathed evidence for necromancy in Greek literature is Odysseus’ consultation of the dead seer Tire sias in the Homeric Odyssey (around 700-650 B.C.). Being pressed by her lover Odysseus to reveal to him the way to his home island Ithaka, the witch Kirke send him to the entrance of the underworld to ask the dead: “There is a rock, and the meeting place of the two roaring rivers. There, hero, ...dig a pit... and around it pour a libation to all the dead, first with milk and honey, thereafter with sweet wine, and in the third place with water, and sprinkle on it white barley meal... Then many ghosts of men that are dead will come forth. ... and the seer will quickly come to you, and he will tell you your way” (Hom. Od. 10.515-10.539).

Unfortunately, the location of the nekyomantion, where Odysseus met Tiresias, is still ambiguous. Herodotos and Pausanias placed it at the Acheron Valley (Hdt. 5.92; Paus. 9.30.6) in modern Epirus. There, in the middle of the 20th century Sotirios Dakaris identified the oracle with a Hellenistic vaulted cave-like crypt, excavated underneath the monastery of St. John Prodromos at Mesopotamos (Fig. 14.1.) (Dakaris 1993). Following the Homeric text, he reconstructed a labyrinth-like sanctuary, dedicated to the underworld goddess Persephone, whose 7th-5th century statuettes were found inside the building and in a treasury, buried 100 m down the hill. According to Dakaris the enquirers were left in complete darkness for several hours, performing purification and sacrifice rituals, before they were let in an inner chamber, where they were supposed to meet the dead. Dakaris also reconstructed parts of several iron wheels, which were found in this area, to a kind of deus ex machina machinery, which was used by the priest for a dramatic illumination of the dead’s appearance.

How convincing Dakaris’ argumentation might be and how mystic the place itself appear to the modern visitor - it is not very likely, that such an elaborate sanctuary is not mentioned by any ancient author and misses any inscription or dedication. Therefore the German archaeologist Dietrich Baatz suggested a completely different interpretation of the place (Baatz 1999). He believes that the superstructure belongs to a Hellenistic fortification, the vaulted chamber was used as a central storage room and the iron wheels were part of catapults, which were burned down, when the building was finally destroyed by the Romans in the 2nd century B.C.

Nevertheless, even if Baatz’s explanation of the remains themselves seems to be more rational, the location of the nekyomantion must be nearby, as the similarities between the literary descriptions of the place and the topographical reality are obvious. The monastery hill, indeed, lies “on a rock/hill, at the meeting place of two roaring rivers” and also the Homeric description of Odysseus’s journey can be traced in the geography of the Acheron Valley. Furthermore, the presence of the 6th-5th century treasury of Persephone statuettes definitely refers to a cult place of this goddess near by. While Daniel Ogden suggests that the rites took place at a natural, but architecturally not specified area at the lakeside (Ogden 2001, 49), it is also likely that the nekyomantion was located in a natural cave.
at the slope of the hill, which was architecturally modified in later times, to meet the demands of the ritual.

**The Nekyomantion Of Herakleia**

Fortunately, the nekyomantion of Herakleia Pontike (Fig. 14.2), at the south coast of the Black Sea, provides much better archaeological material. The city Herakleia was named after Herakles by the Megarians, who established a colony here at 560 B.C. but it is likely that there was a kind of oracle or death cult before that. In 1966 Wolfram Hoepfner located the cave with the help of the Late Antique writer Quintus Smyrnaeus, who described the oracle in the 3rd century A.D. as “a marvellous cave …with water running through and niches all around” (Quint. Smyrn. Post-Homerica 6.469-6.491). It is the middle of three caves on the south side of the so-called Acheron Valley (Hoepfner 1972). A narrow dromos-like entrance leads over a twisting stairway to a roughly rectangular chamber (45 m wide and 20 m deep), which is mostly flooded by water over a meter deep. Two polished stone pillars support the roof. At least on the east side the walls are worked. Small half round niches are tooled into three of the walls. On the south side is a plastered alcove, where Hoepfner suggests a cult statue of Herakles. Architectural fragments may indicate that there have been other structures within the chamber. Another narrow tunnel leads from the northwest-end to a small low unworked chamber, where the excavators found some human bones, which can be dated in Post-Roman times. While Hoepfner denies any Pre-Greek structures - but could not provide any other dating at all - a Pre-Greek cult could either have taken place in an unworked cave or a smaller chamber, which was enlarged in Greek times.

**The Nekyomantion Of Tainaron**

The sanctuary of Tainaron is situated at the north end of the Sternis Bay (Fig. 14.3) at the very South of the Peloponnese (Cummer 1978, 35-43; Schumacher 1993, 62-87). According to Pomponius Mela, it was close to the tip of the promontory and close to a temple of Poseidon in a bay and in a grove (Pompon. 1.103). Pausanias mentioned it as a temple “made like a cave” (Paus. 3.25), though he was disappointed, that there was “no path in the underground from there”. What we see nowadays are the remains of a small cave above the beach, 50 m below a Hellenistic structure. Interestingly the Christian chapel build over these remains was dedicated to the Agioi Asomatoi, the “bodyless saints”, which reminds on the ancient ghosts. The cave is 15 m deep and 10-12 m wide. Its roof is collapsed. A 2 m thick ashlar wall, build on rock cut foundations and fitted with a doorway, closed the entrance. East of the entrance the natural rock has been trimmed to form a terrace. On the western side were cuttings for the erection of statues and stelai with the records of the sanctuary. Around the bay, several other structures were found, which might have been houses for priests and pilgrims.

**The Sibyllian Cave At Cumae**

Another possible setting of the Homeric nekyomantion is the lake Avernus, a flooded volcanic crater, located about 20 km east of Naples. Straban wrote, that “Avernus is shut in by steep beetling banks, …which were formerly covered with a wild wood of black and impenetrable trees. These made the gulf into a home for shades, because of superstition …there was a source there of drinkable water by the sea, but all keep back from this, considering it to be the water of the Styx… the oracle is situated somewhere nearby and priests guide through the progress, who managed the place under contract…” (Straban 5.4.5). At the latest since Virgil’s Aeneid, the area is also connected with the cave oracle of the Cumaean Sibyl, a prophetess, who gave her answers in ecstatic trance (Verg. Aen. 6.237-6.242). Virgil describes the place Aeneas descends into the underworld, as “a deep cave, huge with vast gape, rugged, safe because of the black lake and the darkness of the groves” (Verg. Aen. 6.237-6.239). Indeed, the scenery seems to be perfect for the entrance to the underworld. Still, the surrounding Phlegraean fields are full off active volcanic fumaroles, hot springs, and mephitic gases. The slopes of the hills surrounding the lake are covered with a dark forest and the soft tufa rock abounded in natural and man-made caves. However, none of them could have been identified as the nekyomantion cave, yet. A huge vaulted chamber, the so-called Grotta della Sibilla at the south side of the lake turned out to be an military supply tunnel (Amalfitano 1990, 174-175) and a tunnel at the Roman resort Baiae was probably not used as a death oracle (Paget 1967), but for the warm water supply of the near by bath. At least the cave underneath the akropolis of nearby Cumae, if not used as an oracle in the first place, was already shown to ancient tourists as the Sibyl’s Cave (Maiuri 1958; Pagano 1985-1986). This 50 m man-made tunnel with three cisterns at the east and closable window-like openings at the western sea-side, ends before a vaulted chamber, which could be closed by a iron door (Fig.14. 4).

**The Plutonion Of Acharaka And Hierapolis**

While there is no nekyomantion attested for the area of Asia Minor - there is a similar group of sanctuaries related to the god Pluton - the so-called charonion or plutonia. Like the Greek death oracles, these cult places were established around caves.

In Acharaka, about 5 km west of the ancient Nysa on the northern shore of the Maiandros River, Strabon describes a healing sanctuary of Pluton, with a temple for Pluton and Kore next to a holy grove and the charonion, a cave “by nature wonderful” (Strabon 14.1.44). The ill either stayed in the sanctuary, and let the priest sleep in the cave on their behalf to find a cure for their disease, or they were “left in the cave, to remain in quiet, like animals in their lurking-holes, without food for many days” (Strabon 14.1.44). For all other creatures the cave was dangerous, which was demonstrated in an annual ritual, when a bull
was let into the cave, who then fell down and died immediately. Today one could find the remains of a peripetal limestone temple (6 x 12 columns) possibly built in Hellenistic times (Diest 1913, 60-77; Friese 2010a, 165-166, 386-387). Next to the temple there are several vaulted structures at the edge of a small canyon, which let to an open cave. Its walls show several man-made structures. Yellow sediment next to a small river at the bottom of the canyon might indicate a high level of sulphur in the water, which is typical for healing sources.

Not far away, there was another well known plutonion - in the Apollon sanctuary of Hierapolis. South of the well preserved theatre of the ancient city is a walled courtyard with stoas at two sides. The now seen in antis temple was built in the 3rd century A.D. above a Hellenistic predecessor. Underneath its south side, which was built on solid rock, was the plutonion (Fig. 14.5) (Carettoni 1963-1964; Friese 2010a, 173-175, 389-390). Located in the back of a paved courtyard with several statue bases in situ, its entrance was a cleft in the natural rock vaulted by a roof. It leads to a small paved chamber with a narrow gap in its back wall. Behind it is a deep and dark chasm with a strong smelling river at its bottom. As the vapour could still be dangerous for the tourists visiting the nearby travertine terraces of Pamukkale, the entrance to the chamber is nowadays blocked. In Roman times Strabon described the plutonion as “full of vapour so misty and dense that one can scarcely see the ground” (Strabon 13.4.13). Only the Gallo, the eunuch priests of the Phrygian goddess Kybele, could enter the chamber without harm. According to Plinius, they would get into trance by breathing in the vapours from the cave and then become divine like the Pythia of Delphi (Plin. HN 2.207). Like in Acharaka, the priests demonstrated the danger of their business by leading animals in the inner chamber, which then died immediately (Strabon 13.4.14). A small rectangular room with benches on the terrace above the plutonion courtyard might be used as the theatron, mentioned by Kassios Dion, where people could sit and watch these demonstrations (Cass. Dio 68.27.3).

**Between God And Men: Hero Oracle Caves In Greece And Rome**

Ritually as well as mythologically related to the death oracles, though never mentioned with the term nekyomantion, were the cults of deified (dead) heroes. Usually they were established at the site of the hero’s real or mythical burial place or the place, where a hero descended into the earth (Kearns 1992, 65-99; Ekroth 2002). In this context, caves, as a kind of antechamber to the underworld, were very common. Cave oracles connected to a specific hero are known for Amphiaraios in Oropos, Herakles in Bura, Sarpedon in Lykia, Kalches at the Monte Gargano in Apulia and Trophonios in Leivadia (for hero cults in general, see Antonacchio 1995; Ekroth 2002, for oracle heroes and their sanctuaries, see Friese 2010a, 40-52). As the last two provide the most interesting archaeological and written evidence, they should be introduced below.

**The Trophonios Oracle Of Leivadia**

Next to the healing cult of the Amphiaraios of Oropos, north of Athens, which was established at the very place, the hero descended into the earth (Hom. Od. 15.243-15.255; Diod. Sic. 4.68.4) - the most popular hero oracle was the sanctuary of the Boeotian hero Trophonios, which was established in the 6th century B.C. and reorganized in Hellenistic times. While Pausanias and other ancient authors give a very valuable description of this popular oracle site, until today no remains of the sanctuary could be found for certain (Paus. 9.39.4; Plut. Mor. 590-592; Philostr. V A 8.19, for the site today, see Schachter 1984, 268; Turner 1994, 475; Bonnechère 2003, Friese 2010a, 142-144).

In a canyon south of the modern city one could see some artificial grottos with stone benches next to the source of the Herkyna River. Several stones and column fragments in the vicinity could have belonged to one of the temples that Pausanias is mentioning inside the temenos. Besides the temple of the hero himself he refers to a temple of the nymph Herkyna, as well as sanctuaries of Demeter Europe, Zeus Hyetios and the sons of Trophonios (Paus. 9.39.4). There was also a hospice and the so-called "bothros of Agamedes", where the oracle client would sacrifice before he went to the oracle cave to meet the hero. On the top of the mountain at the end of the canyon local archaeologists excavated the remains of a Hellenistic temple dedicated to Zeus Basileus (Vallas and Faraklas 1969, 228-232).

The location of the oracle cave itself is still controversial. According to Pausanias it “...is on the mountain above the sacred grove. A platform of white stone has been built around it... Within an enclosure is a chasm in the earth, not natural, but artificially constructed. The shape is like that of a potter’s kiln... They have not made a way down to the bottom... they bring a narrow portable ladder... After going down, one finds a hole between the construction and the bottom.” (Paus. 39.39.9-39.39.12). Following this description, it is very likely, that a natural cave of at least two chambers, was overbuilt by a prestigious entrance structure. In the 20th century E. Waszink suggested that it was located at the site of a small Christian chapel built in the steep mountainside at the end of the canyon. Narrow stairs lead to an open niche carved into the stone. In its backside right next to the modern altar, is a hole, filled with water, which might lead to another deeper cave chamber (Waszink 1968, 23-30). The excavators of the akropolis, located the oracle in a round structure (3 m east) from the 3rd century A.D. southeast of the Zeus Basileus temple (Vallas and Faraklas 1969, 228-232). However, it is very unlikely that a mystic place like the oracle Cave of Trophonios should be erected directly next to the main temple on the akropolis. Furthermore, there are no natural or artificial structures underneath the round building dating before the 3rd century A.D. But as the oracle of Trophonios is mentioned by Herodotos as one of the oracles visited by Kroisos, it must have been a well known divination place already in the 5th century B.C. As Lee
Ann Turner and Pierre Bonnechère suggest, it is therefore more likely, that at the latest in Roman times, the sanctuary was divided into three main parts: The sacred source and grove in the canyon, the “official” buildings on the akropolis on the top of the mountain and the oracle cave “somewhere in between” (Turner 1994, 468; Bonnechère 2003, 32).

The Calchas Oracle At The Monte Gargano

According to Strabon the oracle of the hero Kalchas was in a cave far up the Drium Mountain at the coast of Daunia, in the north of modern Apulia. Here, “those who consult the oracle sacrifice to Calchas shade a black ram and sleep in the hide” (Strabon 6.3.9, see also Lycoph. Alex. 592). In late Antiquity the site was taken over by the cult of the archangel Michael. As a Christian church, which still is a very popular pilgrimage site, overbuilds the cave since Carolingian times, no archaeological excavation took place there (see Keyserling 1987; Friese 2010a, 186-187). From the modern church an aisle leads down to the cave’s entrance (Fig. 14.6). In the western of two large natural niches the Christian altar probably replaces the pagan one. In the eastern niche is a water basin, which might indicate, that there was a source here in Antiquity. Several steps lead to another smaller chamber at the eastern side of the main cave. Today it is closed and can only be watched through a small hole in the wall. Inside, a narrow slope in the stone ends before a niche. In medieval times, the pilgrims had to squeeze in the hole and up the slope to meditate in front of an icon of the archangel. It might also be the place, where the ancient pagan pilgrims incubate to meet the hero in their dreams.

Between Light And Darkness: Apollon Oracle Caves In Greece and Rome

In Antiquity, Apollon was the god of divination par excellence with the largest amount of oracle sanctuaries of all deities - first and foremost Delphi, the best-known oracle in the ancient world. However, already Bernard C. Dietrich described the discrepancy between the musical and polis related image of the god and the chthonian setting of his oracle caves (Dietrich 1990, 168).

The Apollon Oracle Of Delphi

As Delphi was not only an oracle sanctuary but also a festival setting and an intraurban meeting place, the number and variety of buildings inside the temenos is huge. For this paper, I would like to concentrate on the central place of oracle ritual, the adyton underneath the Apollon temple.

According to the written sources, only the Pythia, the priests and the most important oracle seekers were allowed to enter the adyton (Paus. 10.24.5, see also Plut. Mor. 438B). It was located at the back of the cella in an underground chamber, approached by stairways. Before the Pythia would enter the chamber, she drank from the water of the Kastalia source. As it was said, that the visitors could hear but not see the priestess, there must be a kind of natural or artificial screen or wall between them. Various pictures show her sitting on a tripod above a chasm in the rock [Most famous, see red-figured cup found in Vulci, dated to ca. 440-430 B.C. (Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Antikensammlung, inv. no. F 2538)].

According to Pausanias there was also a golden statue of Apollon, the omphalos, the grave of Dionysos and the sacred laurel tree inside the chamber (see reconstruction by Roux 1957, 476, fig. 1).

As nothing like this could be found inside the remains of the temple and only the Roman travel writers wrote about the central oracle ritual and it’s setting in the chasm. Most of the 20th century scholars believed that it was a trick of the Delphic priests in later times, to make the oracle more mystical and attractive (beginning with Oppé 1904, 214-240). However, the area around Delphi is of high seismic activity. Many earthquakes shock the sanctuary during the ages. A natural gap in the stone could be closed and a small natural cave inside the temple blocked by stones and filled with earth. Moreover, the latest excavations conducted by Erik Hansen and Pierre Amandry could show, that the back of the adyton was shielded by a wall and might have been deeper than the rest of the temple, as it was not fully plastered (Amandry 1997, 271-282). Furthermore, in the early 21st century Jelle de Boer and John Hale detected two hidden faults that cross in the limestone exactly underneath the adyton, creating a path by which petrochemical fumes - especially ethylene - could rise to the surface to help induce visions (de Boer, Hale and Chanton, 707-710). Even if the importance of the gas is still discussed (Lehoux 2007, 41-56), it seems to be proofed that the oracle ritual took place at the site of a natural chasm, which was overbuild by a temple, when the cult became more popular.

The Apollon Oracle Of Ptoion

The oracle of Apollon at a mountain slope north of Thebes was said to be established by the local hero Ptoios. Since the 8th/7th century B.C. Apollon with the epithet Ptoios was the main oracle god here (Hdt. 8.135; Paus. 9.23.6). Next to the temple was a grotto with a source, where a priest would sit and give advice in an unknown language, after drinking from the sacred water.

The remains of the sanctuary could be found on three terraces. On the upper terrace, an archaic temple was rebuild in the 4th century B.C. Next to the temple is a small grotto, which might be natural in the beginning but extended by carving deeper in the stone and by adding a stone porch. Though no source can be detected in the vicinity of the grotto, it might be the one, where the priest gave oracle since classical times (for the sanctuary, see Ducat 1971; Schachter 1981, 52-72; Friese, 2010a, 152-154).
The Apollon Oracle Of Klaros

The sanctuary of Klaros, 2 km north of the ancient harbour of Notion at the coast of Asia Minor, is said to be founded by the seer Mopsos (Strabon 14.1.27). The written sources do not mention any particular buildings inside the temenos, only a sacred grove of ash trees (Paus. 7.5.10). Fortunately, the archaeological evidence is much better. The earliest votives (a bronze knife with a dedication to Apollon and some fibulae for Artemis from the 10th century B.C.) were found around an altar, probably dedicated to Artemis. A first cult building south of the Hellenistic temple is dated to the 6th century B.C. (for the votives, see Dewailly 2001, 365, for the excavations in Klaros, see de la Genière 1992, 195-208; Friese 2010a, 175-179). The oracle took place in an artificial underground chamber underneath the temple cella. After meeting the clients in front of the temple, the priest “descends into a cave and drinks a draught from a sacred spring, the man, who is commonly ignorant of letters and of poetry, utters a response in verse answering to the thoughts conceived in the mind of any inquirer” (Tac. Ann. 2.54). In fact, two staircases led from the pronaos to two underground narrow corridors, which met after turning their directions for several times under the temple cella in a small room. In its back, a door leads to another vaulted underground chamber next to its entrance and a bench (for the priest?) at its west wall. While the whole temple was erected in the 4th century B.C., the underground chambers were built or rebuilt in the Augustan period.

Meeting the Gods: Oracle Rituals In Graeco-Roman Landscape And Architecture

As this short archaeological overview shows, all of the oracle-caves have a similar cult-architectural structure: they were situated in a more or less rough and mystic landscape, far away from any settlement and often surrounded by a sacred grove. In the nekyomantia and hero cults, we do not find a temple, but a cave as the place, where the oracle ritual took place. Only the oracle caves of Apollon (Delphi, Klaros) were overbuilt by prestigious temple buildings. These caves could be natural or architecturally modified in a way, that the entrance was either blocked or narrowed by walls to restrict the view. Inside the cave, natural or artificial niches or chambers would separate the caves in single sections. As water seems to play an important role in the divination ritual, most sanctuaries provided a water source or had access to a water basin in or near the cave.

So what happened inside these caves? Did the clients of ancient oracle really believe, they would meet the deity or did they fall for the line of a clever organized ritual dramatisation as it is suggested for Ephyra or for the Pythia at Delphi?

To answer these questions, we have to differ between medium-induced and self-induced oracle experiences. While in some Greek oracles, the answer was read in the leaves of a tree (Dodone) or the smoke of the altar fire (Olympia), the most creditable and impressive way of divination was to get in contact with the deities themselves or - even better - to be possessed by them (for the discussion on the reliability of Pythia’s Trance, see Maurizio 1995, 69-86; Friese, 2010a, 83-86). In most of the Greek Apollon oracles a male or female medium gave the answer to the oracle client. He/she was “seized by the god” through various rituals like drinking from sacred water (Klaros, Ptoios) or breathing in toxic vapours (Delphi, Hierapolis). On the other hand, the consultation of a nekyomantion or hero oracle was always a self-induced oracle experience. This means that the client had to evoke the impression of the dead/hero by himself. No priest accompanied the client in the central ritual or told him/her what to do or see.

In both cases it was necessary to get the client in a state of mind, which could be described as “in the mood for a divine experience”. One option was to keep him/her in the sanctuary as long as possible before the central oracle ritual took place - by performing several preparation rites. Most of the sanctuaries provide buildings or space to accommodate the visitors. But while the visitors of a medium-induced oracles like Delphi and Klaros only had to perform several sacrifices, the clients of a death or hero oracle had to be much more involved. Pausanias tells us about the preparations of the Trophonios oracle of Leivadia and that the client had to stay in a hostel inside the sanctuary for more than two weeks, before he went to the hero. During this time the client had to fast, sacrifice, pray, and bath several times both day and night (Paus. 9.39). Also the patients in Acharaka stayed in the sanctuary for several days or weeks (Strabon 14.1.44). Most of the time, the client was accompanied by cultic staff, which surely told him/her what they had to await. In the end, the lack of sleep, the fasting in combination with the constant presence of the forthcoming, intensified by perpetual praying and contact with the priests, led to a sensitive state of mind, in which the clients were more impressive for transcendent experience than in their daily life. Prepared like this, they finally went down the entrance to the underworld.

To explain the way the divinities appear (to either the medium or the client), modern research provides different speculations. The Pythia was said to get into a trance like status by drinking the water of the Kassotis source, chewing laurel leaves and/or inhaling the vapours coming out of the chasm beneath her feet (Paus. 10.24.7; Lucian Bis, acc. 1). The Ptoion and the Klarian priests drank from the sacred spring in the adytum before giving the answers in “foreign tongues” (Paus. 10.24.7; Tac. Ann. 2.54; Hdt. 8.135). However, while modern research is still arguing about a scientific explanation (for the Delphic Pythia, see e.g. Lehoux, 2007, 42-56) - for the ancient oracle client it was probably not important how the medium got into trance but that he/she was into this state at all.

To make an oracle client believe, that he/she was truly talking to the deity himself/herself was obviously much

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more difficult. There are only few written sources about what actually happen during the evocation and most of them are more or less imprecise. Once more Pausanias tells us about the Trophonios consultation in Leivadia: “When one has gone down, one finds an opening… The man lays himself down on the floor with the barley-cakes mixed with honey, and thrusts his feet into the opening and pushes forward in his eagerness to get his knees inside it. Then the rest of his body is immediately dragged along and follows to engulf one caught in its current. Thereafter there is no one or same way in which those who have entered the shrine are instructed about the future, but sometimes a man hears, and sometimes another man sees” (Paus. 9.39).

What followed, Plutarch describes for Timarchos, a student of Sokrates, who stayed in the cave for more than two days that: (Plut. Mor. 590) “After praying in complete darkness for several hours, he reached a status between waking and dreaming. He then felt a painful hit on his head and that his soul left his body. He saw flickering colours, a glowing sea with islands and he heard a soft voice asking him, what he wanted. When he turned to see who was speaking, he felt another strong pain and lost consciousness. He then woke up, where he began his journey, in front of the cave”.

This imprecise way, ancient authors wrote about the experiences inside the oracle caves speak for a trance (or dream) like status of the client, in which he/she either believed to see something/somebody or succumbed to an optical illusion. Some archaeologists argue, that the clients were led into a dark room, where the priests performed the evocation with complicated machinery or acted as the god themselves (Dakaris, 1993; Schachter 1981-1994, 3, 88). Others suggest that the client or medium was drugged before going down into the cave (for the clients, see Clark, 1968, 64, 73, for the Pythia, see Lehoux, 2007, 42-56). In contrast, some of the more recent interpretations by scholars assume, that the ghost answered the client while he/she was sleeping (Ogden 2001, 75-92). According to this, the inquirer went to sleep and received the prophecy in his/her dreams (incubation), possibly explained or translated by a priest in the next morning (for incubation see Renberg, 2006, 105-47; Ehrenheim 2009, 237-76; 2011; Renberg forthcoming). Incubation is stated e.g. for the healing oracle of Acharaka.

Whatever really happened during the ritual, it must have been of high importance for a successfully working oracle sanctuary, to have at least some control on the client’s experience. As the environment of a cult place was one of the few factors, which could be influenced or modified, it was therefore of high impact. As Ruth Whitehouse could show, already prehistoric cult caves had comparable characteristics to the ancient oracles. They had difficult access and restricted entrances, a minimal penetration of daylight, many stalagmites and stalactites and irregular structure of space that made it uncomfortable or irritating to walk in (Whitehouse 2001, 162, see also the contribution by Faro this volume). The same can be realized in Greek sanctuaries. An artificial wall in front of the entrance of the Tainaron Cave restricted the light and accessibility. At the Herakleia Cave, after passing the narrow dromos-like entrance, the client had to go down a twisting stairway, which stops right in front of a large sea. The other side was probably in complete darkness. The Livadeian inquirer was dragged feet forward through a narrow hole, without knowing what to expect on the other side. Underneath the Klarian temple the only way to the oracle chamber lead through two dark narrow dromoi.

But while prehistoric cult participants used only the natural potential of the caves, at the latest since Roman times, the Graeco-Roman oracle sites were more or less frequently and deliberately artificially modified (for Roman grottos, see Hermannsen this volume). The entrance of the Tainaron Cave was prebuild with a sight restricting wall and a small antechamber. That of the Herakleian Cave was narrowed with a brick tunnel and several niches were built in the inside. The Trophonios Cave near Leivadia was probably re- or overbuild with an oven like superstructure and a ritual relevant architecture inside. The underground chamber of the Klarian temple was vaulted and maybe totally renewed. But in contrast to the competitive monumentalization of other Greek temple buildings, the artificial structures of these adytoi did not suit a representative purpose. Their designation was to intensify the ritual experience. Walls in front of the entrance cut off the light and restricted the view inside and outside a cave. This was made not only to relieve tension on the waiting client outside the cave, but also to intensify the privacy of the ritual inside. Therefore the clients in Delphi could never see the Pythia directly. Furthermore, the narrowing of the entrance of Herakleia and Leivadia had a direct physical impact on the clients, as they had to squeeze through it. This might also be the case for the dromoi in Klaria and the small cave in the west wall of the Kalchas Cave at Monte Gargano. The now following complete darkness, the undetermined proportions of space, intensified by features, like the spiral staircase in Herakleia or the labyrinth-like shape of the Klarian corridors, was meant to irritate the clients perception of space, as they should find themselves in the infinity of the Hades, but not in a small cave.

Conclusion

To conclude, not only the ritual itself or it’s conducting staff, also the surrounding landscape, the natural as well as the architectural, has a direct influence on the believing and practising person (for the relation between cult, ritual and landscape, see Friese 2010c). Or as Lynn Meskell suggests, religion and cult should always be considered as a multi-dimensional experience, in which the body of the participant acts as an “individuated site of interface and resolution between the biological, cultural and personal” (Meskell 1996, 3). This multi-dimensionality depends on the grade of individual involvement in a particular ritual. The more personal a ritual was (autopoiesis), the more important was the individual physical and emotional experience and the more important
function was to find a possibility to influence this. What the ancient oracle client expected from the mystical architecture of an oracle cave can finally be demonstrated at the example of the so-called Cumaean Sibyl’s Cave. Even if it was never used as an oracle, but only associated with it in Roman times, the structure provides all the features mentioned above: a narrow entrance, a long dromos, which could be darkened by closing the western windows, water in the eastern cisterns and a closed chamber at the end of the tunnel, where the Sibyl was waiting to utter her prophecy.
Bibliography


Figure 14.1. Ephyra. Excavation Site Plan (after Dakaris 1993, 15).

Figure 14.2. Herakleia Pontike. Cave II (after Hoepfner 1972, pl. 5).

Figure 14.3. Sternis Bay. Excavation Site Plan (after Ogden 2001, 36 fig. 6).

Figure 14.4. Cumae. So called Sibyl's Cave (after Amalfitano 1990, 289).
Figure 14.5. Hierapolis. Excavation Site Plan of the Apollo Temple (after Friese 2012, 173).

Figure 14.6. Monte Gargano. Grotto of Saint Michael (after Keyserlingk 1987, 241 fig. 40-41).