

CHRESMOLOGY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ORACLES¹

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Introduction

The word oracle refers primarily to a particular method of consulting supernatural beings practiced in ancient Greece. The term is used by extension to refer to similar arrangements which occur or have occurred elsewhere.

In the context of Greek religion, three essential criteria distinguish the oracle from other methods of consulting supernatural beings:

- 1) the belief in a specific divinity who answers questions;
- 2) one or more priests who serve as intermediaries between the inquirer and the divinity;
- 3) a fixed place where the reply is given.²

This paper will discuss only those arrangements in other religious systems, which meet these criteria.

It should be noted that some modern writers have used the term "oracle" to designate methods of consulting the supernatural world which do not fit the criteria that define Greek oracles. Thus many references to "oracles" in the anthropological literature are not oracles by the criteria proposed. For example, Evans-Pritchard uses "oracle" to designate "techniques which are supposed to reveal what cannot be discovered at all, or cannot be discovered for certain, by experiment and logical inferences therefrom."³ Thus he recognizes the Azande use of benge as an oracle. Upon investigation, however, it does not meet the three Greek criteria.⁴

There are or were oracles in the Greek sense in ancient Rome, Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Inca Empire and in modern Tibet. The oracles of Mesopotamia will not be discussed in this paper because we lack sufficient information about their operation. Oracles may have occurred in Polynesia, but further investigation of the data is necessary, and the problem seems more appropriate for a separate paper at this time.⁵

Before discussing each individual oracle, I wish to make explicit the questions being asked of the data:

1. Under what circumstances do oracles originate?
2. How similar are the oracles studied with regard to organization and function? To answer this question we need to know the type of question asked and who asked it.
3. What is the relationship between the consultation of oracles and the nature and power of the supernaturals?
4. Under what circumstances do oracles end?

The following sections of the paper are devoted to a descriptive presentation of each oracle studied. The data contained in these sections will be used as a basis for answering the above questions in the concluding section of the paper.

The Greek Oracles

Oracles occurred in ancient Greece both on the mainland and in Asia Minor. Most of them were dedicated to Apollo, but other major deities and some of the heroes also had oracles associated with their cults.⁶

This paper will discuss only those Greek oracles which are adequately documented from ancient sources, supplemented by archaeological investigations. Unfortunately, the sources upon which the operation of the oracles is reconstructed are of relatively late date and may not adequately reflect the operation of the oracles during earlier periods.

The origin of Greek oracles is not known, and none of the authors consulted discuss the general question of origin even hypothetically. The discussion, therefore, has centered around the origin of specific oracles, particularly the Apolline ones.

The Oracle of Apollo at Delphi

Archaeological investigations dating from the Mycenaean period have shown that Delphi was an old cult site. It is not known, however, if the early cult had an oracle associated with it. At the time of the installation of Apollo at the site during the Archaic period, an oracle became part of the shrine's activities.⁷ Two methods of ascertaining Apollo's will seem to have been in use at the oracle during the Classical period. Lots were used from the sixth to the fourth centuries B.C. to choose a definite number of names from a list presented.⁸ The lots were kept in a vial or in the bowl of the tripod and were shaken at the time of consultation.⁹ The questions which could be asked were limited to a yes or no answer. The exact nature of the lots themselves, the procedure of consultation and the personnel who operated the oracle are not known.

The second method involved a female medium called the Pythia who gave oral responses to specific questions. The Pythias were not exceptional beings gifted with supernatural insight. Each Pythia filled her term of office exactly as her predecessor had and as her successor would. She was the servant of the oracle and was viewed as the instrument through which the divine will was manifested. Aside from this she had no other importance. Apollo simply entered her body and used her vocal organs as if they were his own.

How the Pythia was chosen is not known, but she did hold her office for life. During her service she had to lead a chaste and blameless life, in order to maintain a state of ritual purity. This state of ritual purity was enhanced by the performance of two ritual acts prior to the consultation. Before the Pythia took her seat upon the tripod, which was the source of mantic power, she drank of the water of the sacred spring and either chewed laurel leaves or smoked them with barley.¹⁰ These rites placed the Pythia in the correct ritual condition to receive the god Apollo and to act as his mouthpiece.

During the consultation the Pythia was questioned by a priest of Delphi called the prophet. It was also his responsibility to put the responses of the Pythia in concise form and to deliver them to the consultants, either verbally or in writing.

During the Imperial period a college of five laymen, presided over by an elder and called the Hosioi, was associated with the oracle. Their exact function is not known, but it may have been to act in the name of the mass of consultants with regard to sacrifices on the days of public consultation.¹¹

Originally the oracle was open only once a year for public consultation, but the frequency had been increased to once a month by Plutarch's time. During the rest of the year the oracle was open only to persons or cities which had been conceded the privilege of consulting the oracle at any time. Such cities maintained an official at Delphi who was qualified to offer in his city's name the preliminary sacrifice which was forbidden to be performed by strangers. On the days of public consultation a sacrifice was offered in the name of all the consultants, probably by the village of Delphi itself.¹²

In Plutarch's time not only was a preliminary sacrifice necessary to inquire of the oracle, but the sacrificial victim had to be tested in order to determine if the god was willing to answer. A male goat was sprinkled with water; if he trembled all over it indicated that Apollo was willing to speak. Whether or not such a preliminary test was used during the Classical period is not known.¹³

Apparently any free male could consult the oracle, while a woman had to send a male intermediary. In late times the order of consultation was determined by lot; the method used in earlier periods is not known.

The Pythia's responses were given verbally, sometimes in verse, but often in clear and understandable prose. The prose responses were reserved for a single consultant, while the verse ones were framed in a declaration of a general order and were used for responses of a solemn or official nature.¹⁴

Many questions and responses of the Delphic oracle have been preserved. They show that Apollo was consulted upon a vast number of human problems and important undertakings. He was asked to offer advice and counsel as well as to reveal the future and the hidden present.

In matters of religion Apollo was consulted upon sacrifices, features of local worship, cult-foundation and re-organization, and purificatory ritual. The religious importance of the Delphic oracle and the other Apolline oracles is related to the fact that during the Classical period the major Greek deities were only slightly connected with prophecy.¹⁵ It was useless, therefore, to approach each specific deity to ascertain his or her wishes with regard to a particular problem. Thus it seems that Apollo was considered the general spokesman for the other gods, in view of his being the son of Zeus and of his having knowledge of his father's will. Nevertheless, the basic worship of the chief Olympian deities remained independent of the oracle.

The oracle also played a role in sending forth colonies from Greece, for colonization involved a number of serious religious implications. The prospective founder usually consulted the oracle and the response normally authorized him personally to carry out the plan of colonization. What was actually sought was divine authorization of an undertaking which was already conceived, and a favorable response, of course, would serve to encourage settlers.¹⁶

The Delphic oracle was consulted upon political matters, particularly with regard to the interests of the Greek city-states, but also by kings and other political functionaries.¹⁷ The oracle was asked to sanction political authority and power, to give advice concerning military matters, particularly with regard to how victory could be achieved and to outline a course of action in times of political duress. The responses given to such important questions were generally obscure. It was Apollo's practice to leave his consultants free to refuse the choice of action which he recommended. The obscurity of his responses left the final interpretation up to the consultants and thus protected the oracle from recrimination.

Unfortunately, no questions and responses concerning the affairs of everyday life of private individuals have been preserved. Plutarch mentions that people of his day consulted the oracle on such matters as marriage, traveling, farming and lending money. States were concerned with harvests, cattle-breeding and public health at this time.¹⁸

The height of the Delphic oracle in fame and influence was between the seventh century and the middle of the fourth century B.C. It was never the center of an organized religious system, and in fact, no known oracle has functioned in this manner. Delphi was not supported by any religious dogma or organization but by its reputation as a source of divine guidance, and by accumulated prestige. Unfortunately, changes in the life of Greece during the late fourth century B.C. were making for conditions which eventually brought about the decline and end of the Delphic oracle and the other Greek oracles as well. The greatest change came in the attitude toward the gods of earlier times. The ideas of the Sophists and the natural philosophers as well as the jests against the traditional gods by such men as Aristophanes undermined the old religious beliefs. From the third century B.C. on the authority of oracles was exercised almost exclusively in the religious domain, the political function having been lost through ineptness and uncertainty in times of crisis during the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars. The dissatisfaction with oracles increased, and the Roman Conquest killed any influence which they had previously held.¹⁹

Other Greek Oracles

At the oracles of Apollo at Didyma and Claros, in Asia Minor, the clergy was composed entirely of men, assuming roles comparable to the Pythia and the prophet of Delphi. The association of a male medium with the Apolline oracles seems to have been indigenous to Asia Minor for the practice occurred nowhere on the mainland of Greece.²⁰

The oracle of Zeus at Dodona differs the most from Delphi in its organization and procedure. In late times the clergy was composed of both priests and priestesses who led a disciplined and austere life. The priestesses operated the oracle while the priests performed the sacrifices and transcribed the questions and responses on lead tablets. The will of Zeus was revealed in three main ways: through the rustling of the leaves of the sacred oak tree, through the flight of doves and by the sounds made when striking a brass basin. It is not known how these signs were interpreted or which of the methods was used for what kind of question.²¹

The Roman Oracle

The only known indigenous Italian oracle occurred in the city of Praeneste, in Latium, at a shrine consecrated to the goddess Fortune. The exact origin of the oracle, and even the goddess herself, is not known, although it is believed that both came into existence at a remote period and remained part of the general Italian worship until the last days of the Roman Empire.²²

The oracle operated by lots or sortes, which was a distinctive Italian method of divining.²³ These lots were small rods or plates which bore inscriptions. At the bidding of the goddess, a boy mixed the sortes in an urn and drew one out. A child was employed for this part of the operation, because it was believed that the mantic influence of children was in part due to their lack of intentional bias and in part to their pure and virginal simplicity. These two qualities made them fit mediums for the expressions of divine will. To bring the inscription thus drawn into connection with the question asked and to interpret it accordingly was the work of the sortilegi, a college of priests associated with the temple. Originally the sortes were inscribed with archaic letters, but later they were inscribed with appropriately obscure verses from Virgil. The oracle was open for consultation only on one of the two annual feast days of the goddess. The procedure of consultation is not known. The functions of the oracle are practically impossible to determine since few questions and responses have survived. It is probable, however, that the oracle was consulted on a large number of questions similar to those asked other oracles.

The Egyptian Oracles

There were two different occurrences of oracles in Egypt. Each employed a different method, and each was part of a particular political and religious development in Egypt itself. The first oracles to be discussed are those of the traditional gods--gods native to Egypt whose worship was of considerable antiquity. They first appeared in the time of the native Egyptian dynasties and formed an integral part of the worship of the gods. The second occurrence is the oracle of Serapis, a syncretic god developed in Egypt during Greco-Roman times.²⁴

The practice of consulting a god on human affairs began in the New Kingdom and continued into the post-Empire period. The reason for this late occurrence is not precisely known. It may be that the idea of oracles dates from the Hyksos invasion, when Mesopotamian influence was widespread in Egypt. Testing of this hypothesis, however, would require further knowledge as to the earliest occurrence of oracles in Mesopotamia, as to the exact nature of their operation and as to the nature of diffusion between the two areas.

This paper proposes an alternative hypothesis based largely on Wilson's interpretation of Egyptian culture. From his discussion it would seem that the late occurrence of oracles in Egypt was a response to indigenous political and religious developments.²⁵ During the New Kingdom, it seems that a shift from the divine direction of Egyptian society by a mortal deity--the Pharaoh--to direction by the supernaturals themselves occurred. From this it would seem

that oracles developed as a response to the necessity for finding a means by which the gods could directly manifest their will and knowledge. This period does show an increasing institutionalization of recognized machinery for receiving the divine command.

One factor which Wilson does not seem to consider directly and which can probably be correlated with the increasingly god-centered direction of human and state affairs, is that during the New Kingdom the priesthood for the first time formed a definite professional class, in which succession to office was hereditary.²⁶ This partial independence of the priesthood from secular authority, together with the wealth of the temples, may well have contributed to the development of greater direct manifestation of the gods and of techniques by which to receive this manifestation.

The oracular technique developed in Egypt relates directly to the manner in which the gods were worshipped. The ritual necessary for the propitiation of the gods was performed by a few priests in the innermost sanctuary of the temple. The public were never admitted to this sanctuary. Their only opportunity to come close to their gods and to consult them about personal affairs came during the religious festivals when the statue of the god left its sanctuary and was carried in procession, either to visit another local god or to be carried around the temple and through the town.

At some place along the processional route, an inquirer could present a question to the god's image. Either he or a priest presented the question, either verbally or written on sherds or small pieces of papyrus. Each question had an affirmative and a negative form. The god chose between the alternatives by causing the bearers of his statue to move either in the direction of the affirmative or the negative.

Egyptian oracles were consulted on a wide range of problems, including personal matters of tomb laborers, the appointments of religious officials, and the sanctioning of political and religious authority and power.²⁷ Not only did they act as counselors and advisors, like the Greek oracles, but they also served as judges and courts of appeal.²⁸ From the form of the questions asked the oracles, it would seem that their ability to intervene and to direct affairs explicitly was limited. It is probable that many of the matters upon which the oracles were consulted, particularly those of important political and religious nature, had been decided upon prior to consultation and were merely presented to the deity for final approval.

The Oracle of Serapis

The god Serapis was created some time before 291 B.C. by Ptolemy I.²⁹ He was a humanized and Hellenized form of the old local god of Memphis, called Oserapis. By combining aspects of the worship and ritual of Egyptian and Greek religion in the cult of Serapis, Ptolemy hoped to unite the two peoples under his rule and to create a common meeting ground on which fusion could take place. The choice of the Memphian god was no doubt a good one, for he was a local deity actively worshipped only in a local area and his manipulation into a new cult would not have seriously conflicted with the worship of the more firmly entrenched traditional gods. Further, he was not unsuited for metropolitan status, as

Memphis was one of the great religious centers and was the capital of Egypt during the Old Kingdom and after Alexander's Conquest.

It was apparently the exterior manifestations of the cult which were modified to suit Greek tastes. The statue of the god was not an animal, which was a widespread Egyptian practice at this time, but a bearded man in the prime of life. The liturgical language, for a reason which is not known, was Greek. However, the daily ritual, the clergy and the festivals remained Egyptian. The cult soon became popular with the Greeks, but aside from Memphis and Alexandria and the more Hellenized Egyptians of the nome capitals, it is doubtful if the new god was very widely worshipped by the native Egyptians. Unfortunately, very little is known about the operation of the oracle. The procedure seems to have been for the inquirer to write his question on a piece of papyrus and then to deposit it somewhere in the temple. He slept in some part of the temple, where is not known, and received his answer from Serapis in a dream. The role played by the priests is not known. There were probably preliminary offerings and purification rites by the inquirer but their nature is not known either.

Why the cult of Serapis was associated with an oracle cannot be determined. Incubation, the practice of sleeping in a temple or shrine in order to receive direct revelation from a god, was not a feature of the cult of Oserapis before his transformation, although it did occur in Greece as a curative technique at this time.³⁰

Apparently Serapis was not consulted on administrative or political matters. The questions which have been preserved show that he was consulted mainly by individuals of various ranks about personal problems or situations which refer to both the present and the future.³¹ Two factors may account for the lack of political involvement of the oracle. One is the fact that the new cult was created during the time when the older oracles of the ancient world were in decline and had lost much of their former influence. More personal forms of religion were taking the place of the traditional ones, and it is possible that Serapis filled the new personal and individual needs. The other factor concerns the nature of incubation, which is distinctive in being a private affair. Since no one has intimate knowledge of the dream other than the person who experienced it, the interpretation is individual and therefore open to error and personal bias. This is hardly the kind of stable and impersonal method of consulting the supernatural which would be of service to politicians, for whose purposes more public methods would seem necessary.

The Inca Oracles

All supernatural beings worshipped by the Incas, other than the Creator and the sky gods, were either places or objects of local importance only. These were called huacas and any of them might function as an oracle. There is no general account of the operation of Inca oracles, but there is an account by Arriaga describing the personnel of the shrines, of which a summary follows. The chief minister of the oracle was called Wak'ap willaq, "announcer of the gods." He spoke with the god, reported the response to the inquirer, took care of the physical representation of the deity, bore the offerings, performed the sacrifices, fasted, ordered maize beer for feasts, taught the legends and myths surrounding the god, and reprimanded those who were careless in the worship and

eneration of the huaca.³² He had a subordinate called Yanapag, or "servant," who assisted in the performance of sacrifices.³³ The offices could be held by either men or women, but men usually held the principal offices.

Ministers and the other personnel were recruited in four ways: by descent, by nomination by other ministers, by divine election which might result from being struck with lightning and surviving, or by being subject to epilepsy, and by the person taking office on his own initiative.³⁴ The latter was most common in the case of lesser religious functionaries. A man preparing for one of the more important offices had to fast, refrain from eating salt or chili, from sleeping with his wife, and in some cases from washing or combing his hair.

The Oracle of Pachakamaq

This oracle was located at the town of Pachakamaq on the central coast. Pachakamaq is a local title which means "creator of the world." The god, also called Pachakuyuchi or "Earth shaker," promised crops to those who were faithful, while those who were reluctant to believe in him would be destroyed by earthquakes. He was believed to hold all the affairs of the world in his hands, and was so sacred and venerated that only those he had designated to serve him could enter the part of the temple where his image was kept.

The origin of the oracle is not known, but it is probable that the worship of Pachakamaq was of some antiquity.³⁵ The god was very definitely a local deity, figuring in two local creation myths and exacting tribute from the surrounding wealthy districts. After the unification of the Andean area by the Incas in the second half of the fifteenth century A.D., the sphere of Pachakamaq's influence spread until it reached northward as far as the furthest point of Inca cultural influence in Ecuador. The Incas neither encouraged or suppressed this spread.³⁶ In order to enter the courtyard of the oracular shrine one had to fast for two days. To enter the upper courtyard one had to fast for a year. The messages were received by assistant priests, verbally for the Incas had no writing system, then they spoke with the god. A chief priest directed the operation and maintenance of the oracle, and may have spoken with the god upon occasion.³⁷ The lesser clergy at this oracle seem to have performed the duties of the Wak'ap willaq, with the chief priest being the ultimate authority and director. Before any member of the priesthood could speak with the god, however, he had to fast for many days.

The kind and range of questions asked Pachakamaq is not known. He was apparently consulted by the Inca rulers from the time his shrine was incorporated into the Empire. Atawallpa consulted the oracle, sometime in the fifteenth century A.D., as to whether or not he should fight the Christians. The oracle advised him to do so, saying that he would kill them all. The prediction proved false, however.³⁸

The Oracle of Qatikilla

An account by Augustinian missionaries describes the general nature of oracles in the northern Sierra, but it apparently does not directly refer to Qatikilla, which was the most important oracle in the area.³⁹ The huacas of the Sierra, like others, were idols or objects, such as stones, conceived of as

extraordinary. The objects were kept in reliquaries which were dressed like human beings. When the priest spoke with the huaca a mantle was hung in front of it so that the people present could not see the minister speaking with the god, although they heard the god's voice. After the responses were given, the people held feasts at which guinea pigs and llamas were sacrificed and the blood presented to the huaca. The priest who performed the sacrifices had to fast for three days, during which time he could eat no salt or chili or sleep with his wife. Aside from the chief priest, who corresponds to the Wak'ap willaq, there were male and female servants whose duties were to prepare beer, corn meal mush, and to guard and clothe the huaca.

There is no detailed descriptive account of the oracle of Qatikilla, which was located in the town of Porcon. Apparently the whole town was dedicated to the service of the oracle, and there were many buildings and estates, as well as a large number of personnel, dedicated to the worship of Qatikilla. It is unfortunate that the Incas had no native writing system, for otherwise more questions and responses might have been preserved. As it is, only the political function of the oracles can be clearly seen. No questions of the common people exist and no questions and responses of a religious nature do either.

The Tibetan Oracles

These oracles are the only ones discussed in this paper which are still in existence. Adequate historical and ethnological studies of Tibet are lacking, so it was impossible to ascertain the exact circumstances under which oracles originated in Tibet. However, because all those which exist are associated with Buddhist monasteries, it might be inferred that the practice originated sometime after the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet in the seventh century A.D.

The only oracle which is known in detail is the one operating at the Nechung Gumpa monastery near Lhasa.⁴⁰ It is an official oracle and functions mainly for the use of the state. Its medium, like the other oracle mediums, is possessed by one of the Buddhist protector and guardian deities or dharmapalas. These deities are thought still to be within the spheres inhabited by animated beings and to take active part in the religious life of Tibet. Consultation of the Nechung Gumpa oracle takes place in a chapel within the monastery, during the course of an elaborate ceremony. The medium, after having meditated and fasted for several days and dressed in heavy ceremonial robes, enters the chapel and takes his place upon the throne. Various means are employed to encourage the god to enter the medium's body. Incantations are chanted, incense is burned, and trumpets are blown. The medium finally falls into a heavy trance-like state, during which he answers questions asked of him by a monk. The medium's secretary takes down the answers and may be the one who interprets the responses and communicates them to the inquirer. The medium is able to answer questions as long as the god is in his body. When the god departs, the medium collapses and the consultation is ended. Normally it is not possible for common people to ask the medium to enter a trance for their benefit. If, however, he has answered all the questions put to him by the Tibetan officials on behalf of the state and Pe har remains in his body, then private persons may ask questions, either verbally or in writing.

Examples of questions and responses of the oracle are very limited, and those which exist have to do with state matters, with the exception of one question asking for advice as to which god to propitiate in order to ensure good fortune for the coming year.⁴¹ The Nechung oracle is probably not representative of the various functions of oracles in Tibet, and the others, about which little is known, may be more concerned with the affairs of private individuals and religious matters.

Conclusion

This paper represents the results of research on every mention of the word oracle this author was able to uncover. It is certainly possible, however, that oracles may have occurred in areas where they have not been recognized or may be reported in sources which were unavailable to me. As of this time there is one area where the evidence suggests the possibility of oracles. This is Polynesia, specifically the Hawaiian and Marquesan islands. If the occurrence of oracles in these areas can be proven upon further examination of the data, it will be of some theoretical interest, for otherwise all the known occurrences appear in what can be called civilized societies.

No general statement can be made about the origin of oracles because the evidence does not allow the determination of the antecedents and circumstances in each case. We do know that oracles appear quite early in all the cited areas, except for Egypt. Thus the origin is portrayed in myth and legend which may or may not reflect actual historical circumstances. As has been outlined the late occurrence of oracles in Egypt may be due either to diffusion from Mesopotamia or to local political and religious circumstances.

All the oracles presented in this paper are minimally similar in that they meet the three Greek criteria of a belief in a specific deity who answers questions, of one or more priests who act as intermediaries and of a fixed place where the reply is given. These three criteria set the basic form of an oracle. Any similarities between the oracles, besides the three found in the criteria, seem to be due to the limited possibilities for variation set by this form. The significant variation which does exist seems to be more directly related to the individual religious system than to the particular organization of each individual oracle. Because this paper has not presented data regarding the individual religious systems, the variation will not be discussed in detail. At this time, however, we can point out some important similarities with regard to organization and functions. They are as follows.

Not only do oracles take place at a fixed spot, but when the time of consultation can be determined, they can be consulted only at a specified time. The specificity of place seems to stabilize the oracle's operation and to give it a definite position within the religious system and the total society, while the specificity of time protects the oracle in that it prevents frequent consultation from undermining the influence of the oracle's prophecies. An oracle can maintain its influence only if it is believed to give accurate and truthful advice and counsel. It would seem that this image would be hard to preserve if people had ready access to the oracles services.

None of the oracles discussed in this paper are operated by just one priest, but by a corps of religious personnel which is differentiated as to

function and rank. The exception is the oracle of Serapis where no clergy seem to have been involved in the functioning of the oracle. There is a general tendency for the oracle to be presided over by a chief or high priest whose main functions are to perform the sacrifices, to question the medium, or the representation of the god, and to deliver the reply to the consultant. Members of the lesser clergy, however, are not excluded from the performance of any of these functions, although usually their functions are limited to assisting in the ritual activities associated with the oracle's operation.

Because an oracle involves coming into close contact with the supernatural, ritual prescriptions of purity are necessary. For the oracles where information is available, all the clergy must perform some ritually purifying act, such as fasting. In those cases where there is evidence, such as in Greece and Peru, the consultants also had to perform purifying acts before they could consult the god.

With the exception of Serapis, each oracular deity reveals his will indirectly to the consultant. The medium is either a temporary repository for the god or an object which is moved in some significant way by the god's power. Because of the indirect method of consultation, a priest acts as an intermediary between the inquirer and the god as manifest in the instrument. The oracle of Serapis employs direct revelation without the intervening action of the priests. Because Serapis is such an inconsistent exception, it would be interesting to know the motives of the Ptolemies in creating the oracle. The method of incubation may have been chosen in order to prevent the native priesthood from assuming control over the new cult and from utilizing it for their own interests, particularly if the clergy of the new cult was composed of members of the Egyptian priesthood.

From the extant responses it can be seen that the reply was usually clear and concise. This was dependent to some extent upon the method employed of ascertaining the god's will and upon the kind of question asked. Thus with those methods that involved an alternative question the responses are explicit and direct. Where the question was not limited to a yes or no answer, a clear or an obscure response could be given depending upon the nature of the question and who asked it. Delphi is our best example of this, and if the evidence were more detailed this also might be said of Tibet and Peru. What evidence is available seems to suggest that when the question was presented by a private individual with regard to a personal matter or by a person requesting religious guidance, the answer tended to be direct. When questions of a political nature were asked, the reply tended to be obscure. It seems fairly clear that the obscure answer was given in order to protect the oracle, not just from the consequences which would arise from angering an important and powerful consultant, but from its clientele losing faith in its ability to give truthful and accurate answers. No oracle will continue to be consulted if it gives answers which consistently prove to be wrong.

The above discussion has centered on some general similarities in the organization of the oracles presented in this paper. Oracles also have similar functions, which can be seen in the kind of question that is asked and who asks it. The most important similarity with regard to function is that foretelling the future is a very small part of an oracle's business and is really an

incidental byproduct of its main concern, which is giving advice and counsel. The commonest questions ask, in effect, "what should I do?" Next most common are questions about the "hidden present." The questions about the future which are asked generally refer to the immediate future that we would like to know in order to make decisions.

The next important similarity in function is that the majority of oracles are consulted about political matters, with the exception of Serapis for which there are no extant questions and responses of a political nature. Oracles do not have to have political functions, but they do. When there is ready access to discovering the divine will and gaining divine sanction, there is no reason why political functionaries and units should not take advantage of the opportunity. The political functions of oracles may partially stem from the fact that an oracle is a more stable and more impersonal body than an individual seer or diviner. It is also more public.

It should be noted that the Egyptian oracles have a function which they do not share with the other oracles. This is the judicial one. It is questionable, however, just how much authority in both judicial and political spheres the oracles had. The method seems to have limited the extent to which they could influence such affairs, and no doubt many matters were presented to them for final approval only.

Oracles also have religious functions. They guide men in their acts of worship and propitiation of the gods by specifying to which deities acts of veneration are necessary in order to obtain certain human results and by prescribing necessary ritual for the worship of one particular deity, for the expiation of sins and for specific religious activities, such as festivals. However, an oracle is not a center of a religious system or a house of worship, but rather exists as a part of the wider complex of religious beliefs and activities.

One last function which needs to be mentioned is the giving of advice to private individuals. The questions and responses of a personal nature probably made up the bulk of the service rendered by the oracles, for they were no doubt consulted by many individuals on a wide range of human problems. The oracles flourished on the belief that much of what happens is a result of the free will and controlling power of individual gods whose favor can be won if they are properly approached. Apparently beliefs about fate and causation had little to do with the consultation of oracles and in the areas where oracles are present such beliefs are not well-developed. The main business of the oracle was not to reveal man's hidden destiny or fate, but to guide people to the proper gods and tell them what they had to do in order to win the god's favor.

No one set of circumstances can be postulated for the end of the oracles discussed in this paper. The Inca ones came to an end with the Spanish Conquest. Those of Dynastic Egypt died out under foreign rule which undermined the traditional worship. The Greco-Roman oracles and the oracle at Praeneste ended with the spread of Christianity. The Greek oracles declined under radical political and religious changes in Greece and finally ended their service during the period of the Roman Empire. The Tibetan ones may still be in existence, but may end under the pressure of the Chinese Communist invasion. From this cursory summary

of the end of each oracle, it seems evident that they die either from external conquest or from the aging of the traditional gods who can no longer meet the needs created by internal changes.

Oracles are primarily a religious institution. Their personnel is dedicated to divine service, either professionally or as laymen. There is a quality of sacredness and ritual purity which surrounds all of the oracles which stems from the contact with the supernatural which is to be treated with veneration and respect. Oracles operate within a framework of accepted ideas and beliefs about the supernatural world and man's relation to it. They are peripheral to the wider religious system in that they do not form a part of the wider, more general public and private worship. The gods associated with the oracles, however, may be part of this wider system, either locally or societally.

The purpose of the oracle is to give men access to the gods and to their will and counsel. It is not the only religious technique which does this. What may distinguish the oracle from other types of divination is that it is to some degree institutionalized. This can be seen in its specificity of time and place and in the formal organization of its operation and personnel. This distinction, however, is based upon the sample presented in this paper, and further research may not bear out this final conclusion.

ENDNOTES

- (1) The author gratefully acknowledges the guidance and generous help given by Professor John Howland Rowe, under whose supervision this paper was written as a directed research project in the fall of 1960. Professor Rowe also very kindly translated for me the various Spanish accounts on which the discussion of the Inca oracles is based.
- (2) These criteria are based upon two definitions, one by Bouché-Leclercq 1897; Vol. II, p. 228 and the other by Fernique 1880:90.
- (3) Evans-Pritchard 1937:10.
- (4) See Evans-Pritchard 1937 for a comparison of the benge "oracle" with the proposed criteria and for a fuller discussion of other Azande "oracles."
- (5) The idea that oracles may have occurred in Polynesia is based upon data presented by Handy 1926 and 1927, but a thorough check of his material in the literature on Polynesia before 1900 is necessary before we can state explicitly if oracles did occur.
- (6) See Bouché-Leclercq 1897, Vol. II, Section 1, pp. 250-409 for a complete discussion of the lesser Greek oracles.
- (7) Amandry 1950, Chapter XX.
- (8) Ibid., p. 35.
- (9) Ibid., p. 36.
- (10) Ibid., pp. 118, 126-129.
- (11) Ibid., pp. 123-124.

- (12) Ibid., pp. 81-84.
- (13) Ibid., p. 105.
- (14) Ibid., p. 167.
- (15) Parke and Wormell 1956, Vol. I.
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) See Herodotus for various examples of questions asked the Delphic oracle concerning political matters.
- (18) Plutarch 1918, XXVIII C, p. 109.
- (19) Amandry 1950.
- (20) For a complete presentation of the material on the oracle of Apollo at Didyma see Fontenrose ms 1933, and for the oracle of Apollo at Claros see Picard 1922.
- (21) See Carapanos 1878 for material relating to the oracle of Zeus at Dodona; also Bouché-Leclercq 1897, Vol. II.
- (22) Fernique 1880:75.
- (23) Bailey 1935.
- (24) Both Wiedemann 1897 and Wilkinson 1878 mention other oracles associated with the traditional gods of Egypt, but the information concerning them is insufficient to be included in this paper.
- (25) Wilson 1951.
- (26) Černý 1952:116.
- (27) For examples of the kinds of questions asked the Egyptian oracles see Černý 1930, 1935 and 1942; Breasted 1906, Vol. 4; Nims 1948.
- (28) For examples of the judicial function of the Egyptian oracles see Blackman 1925 and 1926; Gardiner 1933.
- (29) Kiessling 1949.
- (30) Witness the cult of Asclepius which involved incubation as a curing method.
- (31) See Bell 1953 and Hunt 1911, 1912 and 1916 for examples of the questions addressed to Serapis.
- (32) Arriaga 1621:17-18.
- (33) Ibid.
- (34) Ibid., pp. 20-21.
- (35) Jerez (1534) 1938 mentions that there were many ruined buildings in the town of Pachakamaq.
- (36) Rowe 1960, personal communication.
- (37) Pizarro (1533) 1938:261-262.
- (38) Jerez (1534) 1938:15-115; see Pizarro (1571) 1944:55-56 for examples of other questions and responses of the oracle of Pachakamaq.
- (39) Relación . . . (1561) 1918.

- (40) The following material on the Nechung Gumpa oracle is taken from Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, Chapters XXI and XXII which is the major source on Tibetan oracles in general.
- (41) Bleichsteiner 1950:30.

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