

ORACLES AND OMENS

For major decisions, the Greeks always sought the advice of the gods. One way was to consult an oracle. An oracle could be a priestess who spoke for a god, the holy place where this happened, or the message she gave.

The most famous oracle was at Delphi, where the god Apollo was believed to speak through his priestess, called the Pythia. The Delphi oracle was so well-known that many Greek states sent delegations there for political advice.

Another skilled art, only undertaken by trained priests, was reading signs, or omens. An omen could be seen in such things as the entrails of sacrificed animals, the flight patterns of birds, or in flashes of lightning and earth tremors.

SOOTHSAYERS

Soothsayers were people who were thought to be able to see into the future. One famous and tragic example in Greek legend was the Trojan princess Cassandra, who was punished by Apollo for breaking a promise. He gave her the power to see the future, while ensuring that no one would believe her. When she warned the Trojans about the dangers of the wooden horse, they ignored her with fateful consequences: their city was destroyed by the Greeks.

These are the ruins of the temple of Apollo at Delphi, site of the most famous oracle.



This is a painting of the god Dionysus, subject of one of the wilder mystery cults.

MYSTERY CULTS

People who wanted a deeper religious experience could join a mystery cult, a group of people dedicated to a particular god. Members had to undergo strict training, including purification rituals and processions at night. Once admitted to the cult, they were sworn to secrecy, so no one is really sure what was involved.

