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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5sm203gk>

Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal of Classics, 6(1)

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Publication Date

2017

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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

Gifts to Apollo: Tracking Delphi's Changing Role through Dedicatory Practice

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Abstract: *This text analyzes the offerings dedicated to Delphi by autocrats during the site's lifetime as a sanctuary to Apollo in order to understand Delphi's role as perceived by Mediterranean powers, and how this role changed through time. Using a combined approach from the fields of art history and classics, the evidence for this paper comes primarily from visual analysis of surviving dedications, as well as study of ancient texts written by classical historians and ancient witnesses to Delphi, such as Herodotus. Through chronological examination of autocrats' dedications to Delphi, from the site's genesis as a religious sanctuary in the 8th century BCE until its decline under the Christian Roman Empire, this paper seeks to understand Delphi's changing role and level of influence as perceived by both mainland Greeks and foreigners.*

Delphi holds a place of high prestige in the ancient history of Greece as the site of deliverance for the oracles said to come from Apollo through the utterances of his mortal priestess. The influence of these oracles and the reputation of Delphi itself were widespread throughout the ancient world, and have continued to pique interest into the modern day. Unfortunately, the material grandeur that paralleled Delphi's fame thousands of years ago no longer remains, or is left in fragments. The impressive appearance of the site came from extravagant dedications given by visitors to the oracle, who travelled to Delphi from all stretches of the Mediterranean to show piety to Apollo. It is these dedications that track Delphi's lifetime as a sanctuary to Apollo, from the earliest example of monumental architecture in the 7th century BCE to its decline under Roman rule in the 4th century AD. By looking at dedications given by autocrats from across the Mediterranean, we can track Delphi's changing role and level of influence as perceived by both foreigners and mainland Greeks.

Although it is uncertain whether the oracle was established during Delphi's earliest years, there are traces of consistent settlement extending back to Mycenaean times, as early as 1400 BCE.¹ It is difficult to ascertain when exactly the site took on its role as a sanctuary because the earliest buildings were constructed from ephemeral materials, so any temples or sacred spaces from this period have left no trace for archaeologists. The earliest monumental acknowledgement of the site as a sacred space was a treasury dedicated by the Corinthian tyrant Cypselus around 750 BCE.² This structure was built to store smaller dedications such as bronze shields or tripods, which had been previously dedicated in specific (yet unmarked) locations around the site.³ Before the establishment of this treasury, Delphi was already receiving expensive dedications from mainland Greek regions like Attica and Thessaly, but also from foreign entities like

¹ Michael Scott, *Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 43.

² *Ibid.*, 66.

³ Hdt. 1.14

Cyprus.⁴ So before there was any physical or visual attestation (like Cypselus' treasury) to speak to the oracle's validity and association with Apollo, supplicants were dedicating valuable gifts at Delphi, showing the site's perceived merit among the people of the Mediterranean.

The building of Cypselus' treasury reflects Delphi's increasing validity and religious importance in the 8th century BCE. Previously, dedications to Apollo lay scattered around the site, with loose organization; for example, eastern dedicators tended to place their offerings on the eastern side of the site.⁵ However, Cypselus showed a desire to consolidate Corinth's offerings and emphasize their distinction from other dedications. By providing a structure to store the offerings of the people of Corinth, Cypselus made it obvious from whom these dedications came, with no hint of anonymity; in the treasury, the dedications didn't just reflect well on their dedicators, but on Corinth as a whole.⁶ The treasury was built in a conspicuous location facing the earliest entrance to the sacred area, not to be overlooked by visitors to the sanctuary.⁷ It was a message that Corinth was elite, not only in regards to its piety to Apollo, but also in its wealth and power. The building of this treasury marks a change in Delphi's role to the people of the Mediterranean. Cypselus set into motion the idea that Delphi could be used as a place to send messages and assert power; and indeed, Athens soon after responded with a treasury of their own, to be followed by more poleis later in the century.⁸

It was not just Greek autocrats that sought to devote lavish gifts to Apollo at Delphi; kings and tyrants from the eastern Mediterranean were especially involved in dedicatory practices. According to Herodotus, the first foreigner to dedicate gifts to Delphi was Midas of Phrygia, who gave a royal throne upon which he had used to give judgments, that Herodotus deemed "well worth seeing".⁹ The second foreigner said to dedicate offerings at Delphi was the tyrant Gyges of Lydia, who dedicated an enormous amount of silver and gold vessels, some of which weighed 2,500 lbs.¹⁰ It was with Gyges around 725 BCE that a relationship between foreigners and the oracle substantially began. As Herodotus tells it, the oracle gave Gyges and his opponents the proof everyone needed that Gyges was the proper ruler of Lydia; Gyges' enemies and supporters had agreed that only if the oracle favored Gyges, would he be given power to rule. In return for the oracle's favorable verdict, Gyges showered the sanctuary in the aforementioned gifts, known by the Delphians as the "Gygean Treasure".¹¹

Delphi's relationship with foreign autocrats continued with Alyattes, a Lydian king who consulted the oracle about how to get over an illness.¹² When Alyattes regained his health after being directed by the oracle to rebuild a temple he had destroyed during war, he thanked Apollo with rich offerings. Among these was an iron bowl which Pausanias saw many years later in fragmentary form, and asserts was welded by the very man who discovered how to weld iron.¹³

Perhaps the loudest involvement by an Easterner at Delphi came from Croesus, a Lydian king in the mid-500's BCE, whose extravagant dedications still remained when Herodotus visited

⁴ "Delphi Archaeological Museum," http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=4685.

⁵ Scott, *Delphi*, 65.

⁶ Richard Neer, "Delphi, Olympia, and the Art of Politics," in *Cambridge Companion to Archaic Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 241.

⁷ Scott, *Delphi*, 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Hdt. 1.14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.13-14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.19-20.

¹³ Paus.10.16.1.

the site almost a hundred years later in the 440's.¹⁴ The inventory of Croesus' dedications given by Herodotus leaves no doubt that these objects were materially valuable, expertly crafted, and probably the most impressive dedications at Delphi at the time they were given.

Possibly the most lavish dedication of the group is a golden lion that despite having been damaged by a fire, was still impressive. The statue was around 600 lbs of pure gold, standing on four blocks of gold weighing 150 lbs each.¹⁵ Herodotus also mentions two enormous mixing bowls, one of silver and the other of gold, which would have been filled with wine and water for use during temple ceremonies. Both vessels weighed around 600 lbs and could hold over 5,000 gallons, which leads H. W. Parke to mention that if the worshippers were able to finish the contents of a bowl, "the capacity of the drinkers [must have been] prodigious".¹⁶ Additionally, Croesus gave silver jars, gold *perirrhantia* cups, a five-foot-tall golden statue of a woman that the Delphians identified as Croesus' baker, and finally Croesus' queen's necklace and girdles.¹⁷ According to Herodotus, this "magnificent sacrifice" was given in order to win Apollo's favor after Croesus tested seven oracles in Greece and Libya, and Delphi's Pythia was the only one who had answered correctly.¹⁸ Following his ostentatious dedication, Croesus consulted the oracle concerning various matters, and was consistently pleased with the answer he received.¹⁹

The involvement of these eastern autocrats at Delphi attests to the trust and validity that the most powerful people in the Mediterranean attached to the oracle. The fact that the Lydians of Gyges' time all agreed to accept the word of the oracle as to who would be given power to rule their nation puts a very substantial amount of trust onto what is to them, a foreign establishment and religion. In Croesus' case, the nature of his dedications show a desire not only to diplomatically show respect for a foreign god, but to gain his favor and use it to seek aid in future endeavors.²⁰ It also shows an eagerness for eastern kings to insert themselves into a world that was becoming increasingly Greco-centric. Poleis began to emerge as the Dark Age came to an end around 750 BCE, which is around the period that eastern kings grew so interested with Delphi, reflecting an attempt by foreign entities to put themselves on par with the Greek poleis and their increasing relevance and influence in the Mediterranean.

These accounts highlighting foreign autocrats' interest and involvement at Delphi would have certainly spread throughout the Greek world, sparking new interest in the oracle. If eastern kings were dedicating works made of thousands of pounds of precious metal, it was a strong testimony to the oracle's validity. At the turn of the century in 500 BCE, Delphi's treasures and the dedications they held "pushed the boundaries of sculptural and architectural excess," as described by historian Michael Scott.²¹ Delphi boasted the number of supplicants it received with an astounding number of offerings, manipulated by dedicators to send messages that were intended to be seen by the greatest amount of people. The idea introduced by Cypselus, of competition with others through ostentation of offerings, was now utilized by nearly every dedicator at Delphi, including poleis, military leaders, wealthy individuals, and autocrats.

Dedications began to serve as a way to send complex new messages, relating to themes like diplomacy and Greek membership. The tyrant Gelon of Gela in Sicily incorporated these

¹⁴ H.W. Parke, *Croesus and Delphi* (Durham University, England, 1984), 1-2.

¹⁵ Hdt. 1.50.

¹⁶ Parke, *Croesus and Delphi*, 3.

¹⁷ Hdt. 1.50-52.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1.48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1.53-56.

²⁰ Parke, *Croesus and Delphi*, 15.

²¹ Scott, *Delphi*, 110.

themes with the victory column and tripod monument he dedicated at Delphi around 480 BCE.²² Having refused to aid the Greeks during the Persian war, this monument seems to have been an attempt by Gelon to align his military victories against Greece's enemies (like Carthage) to Greek victories against Persia, in order to repair his image among Greeks.²³ It is clear that it was very important for autocrats to ensure that they weren't forgotten by the bigger Greek actors, and Delphi was the most appropriate place to assert their relevance. Delphi's patrons came from the most influential Greek poleis and strong foreign entities, all of whom certainly had elaborate displays of their own at Delphi. Any autocrat that did not have a monumental dedication for their city-state on display would have been considered irrelevant.

Around 480 BCE, Gelon's successor, Heiron, dedicated possibly the most famous surviving dedication from Delphi.²⁴ The Charioteer of Delphi (Images 1 and 2) is a life-sized bronze sculpture of a chariot driver, which was part of a larger statuary group consisting of four bronze horses (which the Charioteer was driving) flanked by two more horses, each with a jockey.²⁵ The figure is an idealized youth with an expression of calm confidence, his demeanor perfectly representative of the Greek ideal for a proud, yet modest champion.²⁶ He wears a long tunic with a belt and suspender-like *analabos* at the shoulders, which prevented the garment from billowing during the race.²⁷ The statue is classified as "Severe" in style, which was the dominant sculptural type from 490-450 BCE, when this sculpture was dedicated.²⁸ The figure is rigid in his stance, but not in such a way that makes him look unrealistic, and his pose is more fitting to a scene that would take place after his victory, not during the race.

The Charioteer of Delphi was dedicated by Heiron to commemorate his victory in the chariot race at the Pythian games around 470 BCE, after the games had existed at Delphi for over 100 years. Heiron's successor, Polyzalus rededicated the Charioteer after winning the chariot race a few years later, as if no dedication could be made that would top the Charioteer. An inscription on the base reads "Polyzalus dedicated me...Make him prosper, honored Apollo".²⁹

With this dedication, we can see how Delphi is being used for the same purposes it fulfilled in its earliest days as a sanctuary, but also how it is being used for more diverse purposes as it grows in popularity. The Charioteer thanks Apollo for enabling Heiron to

Image 1



Image 2



Ministry of Culture and Sports. "Delphi Archaeological Museum." Accessed April 13, 2017.
http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/4/eh430.jsp?obj_id=4685.

²² Diod. Sic.11.26.7.

²³ Scott, *Delphi*, 123.

²⁴ Frederik Poulsen, *Delphi* (London: Gyldendal, 1920), 221-223.

²⁵ Neer, "Delphi, Olympia, and the Art of Politics," 237.

²⁶ Poulsen, *Delphi*, 229-232.

²⁷ Manolēs Andronikos. *Delphi*. (Athens: Ekdotike Athenon, 2002), 26.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁹ Neer, "Delphi, Olympia, and the Art of Politics," 237.

win the chariot race in the Pythian games; this act of using a dedication to show piety to Apollo stretches back to the earliest functions of Delphi as a sanctuary. Yet it is also clear that Heiron used this dedication to publicly magnify his victory, which follows the same theme that could be seen in earlier dedications by autocrats, that is, a desire to stand above the rest by presenting a dedication of such value that it meets or exceeds the grandeur of other dedications. Additionally, this dedication asserts membership in the Panhellenic community. The Pythian games summoned spectators and athletes from every corner of the Greek world, so to participate in these games, located in the heart of mainland Greece, confirmed a person's place among Greeks. The investment put into this dedication, as well as many others, reflects the importance of the Pythian games in the Mediterranean during the fifth century BCE.

Delphi enjoyed this pivotal role to the people of the Greek world for a few hundred years, thanks to the successful reputation of the oracle and the popularity of the Pythian games, but the site's influence began to wane alongside the tension and instability that arose with Macedonian administration. King Philip, who led Macedon from 359-336 BCE, appreciated Delphi for its status as a Panhellenic site, but was less interested in piety to Apollo as he was to use the site to try and unite the Greek peoples he had conquered.³⁰ His successor Alexander showed Delphi "a mix of respect and disregard," allowing his generals to dedicate offerings, but never doing so himself.³¹

After the fall of Macedon, autocrats interacted with Delphi in a different manner than what we have seen before. There began a new trend of autocrats donating money for repair or new construction at Delphi, for which Delphi gave thanks by honoring the benefactor with gifts, not unlike gifts given by dedicators. For example, in the 2nd century BCE, the ruler of Pergamon, Eumenes II, donated money and slaves to construct a theater, as the musical contests held at Delphi were still popular. In gratitude, Delphi erected statues of Eumenes II around the site.³² In the past, donors found reward through what they would gain through their dedication; for example, a dedication given in piety to Apollo would, in theory, put Apollo on the side of the dedicator. Delphi's declining status is marked by the point when giving dedications for these reasons was no longer enough, and Delphi had to begin thanking their donors materially. Delphi's decline is further evidenced by Plutarch, who writes that in the past, Delphi needed two active priestesses and one backup to meet demand, but now there is only need for one.³³

Under Roman administration, Delphi still had a functional oracle and held the Pythian games, but was seen as a historical site, popular to visit on tour. From 100 BCE to 100 AD there are no notable dedications from Greek autocrats, and interest from Roman kings and emperors is minimal. The latter were mostly respectful to the site for its history, and some consulted the oracle or the attended the Pythian games for this reason. Roman emperors did not need the aid of the Pythia as Greek leaders once did; if an emperor wished to consult an oracle, there were alternatives to Delphi that were much closer to home.³⁴ For this reason, interactions with Delphi by Roman emperors were typically no more than a simple nod of respect to the site's history.

During this time, the trend of Delphi thanking their benefactors with statues in their honor evolved into Delphi flattering autocrats with gifts in return for attention and financial aid; Pausanias describes statues of Roman emperors on display at the entrance to Delphi, which the

³⁰ Scott, *Delphi*, 163.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 164-165.

³² Scott, *Delphi*, 188.

³³ Plut. *Mor.* 414B.

³⁴ Scott, *Delphi*, 204.

emperors did not put there themselves.³⁵ Delphi didn't just honor emperors like Claudius and Nero with statues of themselves, but also important relatives like Nero's mother and Claudius' fourth wife, Agrippina Minor, were honored with statues.³⁶ It is clear that Delphi was struggling to stay afloat, and kept its head above the water by "attracting, involving, and holding onto Imperial attention".³⁷ Emperor Hadrian, the noted philhellene, took his own interest in Delphi and did not need to be flattered to such an extent. It was from Hadrian in the mid-second century AD that Delphi received the most benefaction it had in years, although not even Hadrian dedicated to Apollo in the traditional manner.

Around 135 AD, Hadrian gave to Delphi the Statue of Antinous (Image 3), an over life-sized marble portrait of a male youth sculpted in the Classical style. Although this type of sculpture had been out-dated for 500 years, Hadrian appreciated the old-fashioned style. The figure is nude with an idealized body, with weight shifted to one leg and the head tilted slightly, in emulation of Classical masterpieces. The facial features are soft and delicate, emphasizing Antinous' youth and beauty. Hadrian commissioned many of these statues of Antinous, his most beloved companion, who drowned in the Nile River. These statues were distributed across the Roman Empire, after Hadrian posthumously deified Antinous and established a cult for his worship at Delphi.³⁸

The Statue of Antinous is spoken of by some modern authors as if it were a dedication, one author saying that "the radiant god of Delphi...may have delighted in the presence of this beautiful boy".³⁹ However, it seems instead that Hadrian did not seek to honor Apollo with his gift, but to honor his mortal companion in a location that drew many visitors. For Hadrian to place a statue of a mortal at Delphi, intending for it to be used as an object of worship for a cult, demonstrates that Apollo's association with the site was weaker than ever; at Delphi's height as Apollo's sanctuary, dedicating a statue to worship a mortal instead of Apollo would have been unacceptable.

After Hadrian, Delphi's importance declined until it reached its lowest point. Although Delphi continued to erect statues in honor of Rome's pagan, and even Christian emperors, the site reached its definitive end as a sanctuary to Apollo in the early 390's AD when Emperor Theodosius officially outlawed paganism.⁴⁰ However, some might argue that Delphi met its end after the fall of Macedon hundreds of years prior. For after this point, Delphi was not as much a place to consult the oracle, give dedications to Apollo, or hide within these dedications complex messages of identity, power, or victory, but rather a place to go for the same reasons that a modern tourist might visit Rome. To see the city where pivotal events took place that changed the course of history; although in the case of Delphi,

Image 3



³⁵ Paus. 10.8.6.

³⁶ Scott, *Delphi*, 208-210.

³⁷ Scott, *Delphi*, 209.

³⁸ Poulsen, *Delphi*, 323-326.

³⁹ Andronikos, *Delphi*, 28.

⁴⁰ Scott, *Delphi*, 244.

those events were still a contemporary practice. Yet, the admiration of these occurrences (like the giving of oracles) as bygone practice contributed increasingly to them becoming just that: bygone. Just as modern historians are intrigued by Delphi, so were their ancient counterparts who visited Delphi during a period that we now see as part of the site's active lifetime, while they did not realize it as such. Although it was unknown to them, Delphi's lifetime grew and waned alongside dedicatory practice; as long as offerings were given to Apollo, Delphi's time was not yet up. As Apollo's gifts grew richer in both value and symbolic complexity, Delphi's place in the ancient world grew along with it. As his gifts grew simpler, so did Delphi begin to falter.

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