The temple of Apollo at Delphi. "The site represents our drive to explore the unknown and unknowable," says Bettany Hughes

IAN THOMSON-FLICKR

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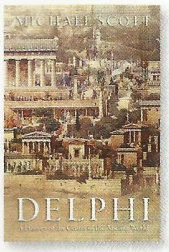
Heart and spirit

BETTANY HUGHES *is enthralled by a study of Delphi, and how it came to occupy a central place in centuries of religious belief*

Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World
by Michael Scott
Princeton, 448 pages, £19.95



Delphi is a sublime place. Scott confesses this in the very first paragraph of his comprehensive and sympathetic history. He admits, too, that it is nebulous. Depending on which ancient authors you read and where you look for your archaeological evidence, this is either a ritual spot visited since the Neolithic era or a watering-hole for networking that drew on many of its 'traditions' – for example, the *pythia* (priestess), a crone dressed in virgin's robes who, high on henbane, babbled oracular pronouncements – as late as the first century AD.

What is clear – and the reason that this book needed to be written – is that, from the late 7th century BC onwards, Delphi mattered. Featured in Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, the pronouncements made in the sanctuary mandated invasions and wars for 10 centuries. The venue for Nero's (fixed) triumphs in athletic and music contests at its own Pythian Games, Delphi was heralded the *omphalos*: 'navel of the world'.

Scott gives flesh to the corpus around this charismatic centre. He charts the evolution of the international offerings found at the Greek site, from palm-sized Bronze Age female figurines to life-sized silver bulls. Access to knowledge offers power; control of the unknown promises omnipotence. And so, just as city-states and dynasties of priests fought fiercely for control of Delphi itself, modern-day Greeks have paid for the restoration of the antiquities created by their 'ancestors'. Scott vividly reminds us that this site has held power over ancient and modern imaginations: Delphi was fiercely protected by partisans against both the Persians in 480 BC and the Nazis in 1943.

"Delphi was a prime location in which to access the will and wisdom of the gods"

Scott deftly demonstrates the architectural nature of history – the importance of imagining chronology in 3D, mortared together brick-by-brick across both time and space. As he shows, Delphi was long a place for politicking; many grew fat on its proceeds. The elite, rich or politically useful were able to skip the queues; indeed, the site grew so busy from the fifth century BC that two *pythias* and an understudy were employed on a rota. There was surely cynicism, but the common experience for truth-seekers from three continents, across the rise and fall of empires, was that this was a prime location in which to access the will and wisdom of the gods.

The recent discovery that mind-altering whiffs of ethylene are released from rock chasms beneath the sanctuary helps to explain Delphi's magic. Whatever you believe to be responsible for animating this landscape – historical accident, Gaia, calculating greed or simply the power of imagination in a place of heart-stopping natural beauty – Delphi represents our species' drive to explore the unknown and unknowable.

As a result, this is the most question-drenched site in antiquity. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus declared that the oracle "neither conceals, nor reveals, but indicates". The aphorism *gnothi seauton* ('know yourself') was famously bannered along Delphi's Sacred Way. It was a harsh exhortation: know your limits; know when to stop asking dangerous questions.

Scott puts it beautifully: both as an idea and an historical conundrum, Delphi ensures we keep the ground 'insecure' beneath our feet. There is no little irony that over-eager 19th-century excavators, determined to claim the site and its 'truth', ruined the evidence of millennia. Thanks to their hubristic certainty, the Delphic riddle endures. H

Bettany Hughes is writing a new history of Istanbul. For more, see *bettanyhughes.co.uk*