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Revelation, Narrative, and Cognition: Oracle Stories as Epiphanic Tales in Ancient Greece

Julia Kindt

Introduction

- 1 Despite the recent surge of interest in divine epiphany in ancient Greek literature and culture, divination features in scholarly accounts on the topic only in passing, if at all.¹ At the same time, discussions of the divinatory experience rarely, if ever, correlate divination and epiphany.² The reason for this is immediately at hand: divination — the acquisition of divine knowledge through an inspired medium, or signs — is usually seen as a religious phenomenon, distinct from the direct physical encounter with the supernatural that typifies the epiphanic experience.
- 2 Yet one feature that brings divination and epiphany together is that both types of religious experience have generated a sizeable body of narratives laying out the human/divine encounter at their cores. While these narratives differ in many ways from the experiences of the divine in real life, they can nevertheless provide insights into how the ancient Greeks conceived of the human/divine relationship along more abstract lines.
- 3 This article compares and contrasts the way in which these narratives reflect on the human/divine encounter. I use a cognitive approach — a type of investigation relatively new to classical studies — to reveal the religious thoughts and modes of³ thinking inherent in these narratives. More specifically, I show that oracle stories and epiphanic tales alike revolve around manifestations of the divine in the human sphere; both parade a complex set of questions relating to problems of human cognition, interpretation, and knowledge. An approach that explores narrative as a form of cognition can ultimately help us to see the differences in how epiphanic and oracular

tales highlight different aspects of the challenges humans face when trying to make sense of the world.

Inspired Divination and Epiphany

- 4 We start from some observations about the principles and practices of epiphany and divination as actual religious practices in ancient Greece. It is against the background of religion as a lived experience that the narrative representation of the human/divine encounter takes shape. In other words, insights into what we know about epiphany and divination as real religious experiences allow us to see more clearly how the narratives have shaped — and in many ways transformed — the human/divine encounter at their cores.
- 5 To start with the obvious differences between epiphany and inspired divination as real life experiences of the supernatural: while both forms of religious experience describe a contact with the supernatural, they usually differ in the kind of contact between gods and humans entailed. Epiphany involves an immediate encounter with a divinity, while inspired divination relies more often than not on the figure of a human medium who either speaks as a mouthpiece for the god (the Pythia at Delphi, for example) or interprets prophetic dreams in oracles relying on incubation, or the interpretation of dreams. The famous oracle of Trophonius at Lebadeia is an exception to the rule. This oracle facilitated the direct contact between the enquirer and the divinity in an elaborate (and frequently terrifying) procedure called ‘*katabasis*’ which involved the imaginary descent into the Underworld and ultimate return through a number of rituals.⁴ Individual forms of divination therefore differ in the extent to which they allow for an immediate contact with the divine. Some are more like an epiphanic experience in this respect, while others provide for an indirect encounter.
- 6 In epiphany, the human/divine encounter is unintentional, accidental, and frequently surprising, and it usually involves physical contact with the supernatural in one of the many guises the gods usually adopt when they physically manifest in the human sphere.⁵ By contrast, oracles such as Delphi, Dodona, and Didyma are consulted for a particular reason and with a specific question in mind. Other sanctuaries — such as those specialising in healing through incubation like the oracle at Epidaurus — were also usually approached with a particular question or problem.⁶ Moreover, because the gods usually appear to humans in disguise, those witnessing an epiphany do not know in many instances whether a god or goddess has just appeared and, if so, which one.⁷ In oracular divination, however, the human petitioners know exactly which divinity they are consulting. The major oracular sanctuaries all belong to a particular deity — such as Apollo at Delphi, Zeus at Didyma and Dodona, or the hero/deity Trophonius at Lebadeia — and that particular deity is understood to be speaking to the human consultant through either inspired speech or dreams.
- 7 The case for epiphany and inspired divination as related phenomena, then, rests on a consideration of the religious issues at stake in both kinds of religious experience. Most importantly, perhaps, in both epiphany and divination, the human/divine encounter is mediated. In epiphany, this mediation occurs through the various disguises (anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, other) the gods and goddesses adopt when visible to humans.⁸ None of these forms in themselves can do full justice to the divine essence they attempt to convey, hence the need to combine them, change between them, or

bring out the otherworldly nature of the divine in other ways (smell, sound).⁹ In oracular divination, by contrast, this encounter occurs through the medium of language.

- 8 Most real-life oracle consultations of oracles were probably pretty straightforward affairs involving simple yes/no questions like the ones recorded in the epigraphic evidence.¹⁰ It is in this point that we first find a notable difference between the actual experience and its representation in narrative form: The representation of oracles in the literary evidence of the ancient world duly acknowledges the fact that oracular language is both *like and unlike* regular human language.¹¹ It is here that we find the notorious ambiguities, metaphors and other tropes which require interpretation to make sense of them, thus stressing that fact that gods and humans can converse with each other only in a mediated fashion.
- 9 Why this insistence on mediation? It has often been pointed out that the literary sources convey the sense that to encounter the gods directly and in an unmediated fashion entails great risk to humans.¹² Greek mythology abounds in examples of humans suffering adverse consequences from inadvertently beholding the gods in all their splendour.¹³ Anchises famously averts his gaze in terror when he accidentally lays his eyes on the goddess Aphrodite: ὥς δὲ ἶδεν δειρήν τε καὶ ὄμματα κάλ' Ἀφροδίτης, τάρβησέν τε καὶ ὅσσε παρακλιδὸν ἔτραπεν ἄλλῃ, ἃψ δ' αὖτις χλαίνη ἐκαλύψατο καλὰ πρόσωπα, "But when he saw the neck and lovely eyes of Aphrodite, he was afraid, and averted his gaze, and covered his handsome face up again in the blanket."¹⁴ The religious reason for this response is that the gods are thought to inhabit another sphere, distinct from the human realm. They belong to a different ontological order. To converse directly with the supernatural would disrupt this division of the universe. The mediated character of the human/divine encounter as represented in the literary evidence ensures that the fundamental ontological difference between gods and humans is maintained even when the human and the divine realms converse.
- 10 In both epiphany and inspired divination, this mediation draws on the conception of divine anthropomorphism. How this applies to epiphany is clear: anthropomorphism is by far the most common form in which the Greek gods and goddesses reveal themselves in the human sphere.¹⁵ To give the divine a human body is also very much in line with how the gods are imagined in statuary representations.¹⁶ Anthropomorphism is the preferred form of divine revelation and representation in ancient Greece. Giving the gods a human body makes inherent sense.
- 11 Inspired divination by contrast draws on the idea of the 'anthropoglotism' of the Greek gods and goddesses — a metonymic variety of divine anthropomorphism. The consultation of an inspired medium like the Pythia at Delphi is based on the idea that the gods can converse with humans through the symbolic medium of language. Language is also key in the interpretation of dreams and other forms of inspired divination relying on the skills of a *mantis* (seer).
- 12 The idea that humans can ask the gods questions and receive answers is in turn based on the anthropomorphic assumption that gods share with humans the physical capacity to speak (through a medium or dreams) as well as to hear, and that gods and humans speak a language if not the same at least similar enough to allow the transfer of information.¹⁷

- 13 Both epiphany and divination are thus forms of relating to the divine that imagine the encounter to involve common human senses and faculties. It may be tempting to point out that differences emerge in the kind of sensory experience involved; that epiphany offers, above all, a visual contact with the supernatural (although other senses may feature too); and that oracular divination, at least of the inspired kind, is auditory: an experience of sound.¹⁸ Yet that would oversimplify the matter. For the oracle of Trophonius at Lebadeia, for example, Pausanias reports: “(...) those who have entered the shrine learn the future, not in one and the same way in all cases, but by sight sometimes and at other times by hearing.”¹⁹ Apparently, different senses were involved in the experience at different points in time.
- 14 Human sensory perception, however, can be deceptive. The things seen and heard need first to be interpreted before they can become meaningful, generating numerous possibilities for humans to get it wrong. This holds true at all times — but especially when it involves the supernatural. Again, this is a point that is elaborated in the literary evidence. Oracle stories and epiphanic tales abound in examples of misinterpretation and foregone conclusions. From Croesus to Oedipus: the man who interprets an oracle wrongly and suffers adverse consequences — even death — is a trope of numerous oracular tales, as is the man who encounters a divinity in human disguise and does not recognise at all what or whom he has encountered.²⁰
- 15 At this point it is important to stress again that even though these examples lead us away from real-life experiences of the supernatural, it would be wrong to dismiss them merely as tropes, or a matter of literary fiction-making. There is a real religious basis to such considerations. As Odysseus succinctly puts it in Book 13 of the *Odyssey*, when Athena appears to him disguised variously as a handsome young shepherd and a beautiful maiden: ἀργαλέον σε, θεά, γνῶναι βροτῷ ἀντιάσαντι, καὶ μάλ’ ἐπισταμένω· σὲ γὰρ αὐτὴν παντὶ εἴσκεις, “Hard is it, goddess, for a mortal man to know you when he meets you, however wise he may be, for you take what shape you will.”²¹ Divine transcendence, it seems, necessarily involves problems of sense-making. The otherworldly nature of the supernatural demands that sometimes the human senses fall painfully short in making sense of the divine — a point highlighted in literary representations of both kinds of religious experiences.
- 16 Understanding the divine, it follows, involves more than mere sensory perception: it is ultimately a cognitive problem. One may see a god but not understand what or who it is one is seeing. Likewise, one may hear the exact phrasing of an oracle and still not be able to make sense of it. These are not different problems but merely different expressions, variants of the same fundamental insight into the limitations imposed by the human condition. Both types of religious experience ultimately constitute a human attempt to know (through the senses) what cannot ultimately be known (or sensed). This is why in the literary representation of these experiences, the gods frequently remain remote and elusive even in those moments when humans seek to converse with them. It is here that the religious views and concepts underlying oracular divination and divine epiphany converge to convey a fundamental sense of what the supernatural is like. We will return to this point in the last section of this article.

Representation – Inspired Divination and the ‘Epiphanic Schema’

- 17 A closer look at how epiphanic tales and oracular tales converge reveals further insights into the religious problems paraded in this form of evidence. Productive similarities and differences emerge in how both types of narrative frame the human/divine relationship as well as the role of the supernatural in the human realm. In particular, it appears that oracular tales draw on narrative to build a sequence that presents the human/divine encounter as a chain of events related in terms of cause and effect.
- 18 In her recent book *Divine Epiphany in Ancient Greek Literature and Culture* (Oxford, 2015), Georgia Petridou has shown that ancient Greek accounts of divine epiphany follow a common ‘schema’, which she summarises as follows:
- The epiphanic schema can be very briefly described as follows: an epiphany motivated by a crisis may provide authorization to a human intermediary, or may lead straight to the resolution of the crisis without the authorization process being activated. The resolution of a crisis is more commonly than not followed by the introduction of some sort of commemorative structure; i.e. festival, statue, athletic contest, pilgrimage, etc.²²
- 19 Oracle stories, I would suggest, follow the ‘epiphanic schema’.²³ Numerous oracle stories featuring in a wide array of literary sources display the same thematic sequence of crisis, authorisation, resolution, and commemoration that Petridou has described as typical of the epiphanic tale. Again, this sets them apart from actual oracle consultations which were frequently carried out to approve human decision-making or to resolve a crisis already solved by human means (e.g., through common sense, or deliberation in the assembly). In the imaginary world of the oracle story, however, the oracle is afforded a more active role.
- 20 As in epiphanic tales, not all parts of the schema are present in every single oracular tale; yet they feature often enough to warrant the conclusion that oracle stories draw on the epiphanic schema in how they make sense of the human/divine encounter. Oracular tales frame the human/divine encounter in ways that recall the organisation and presentation of the human experience of the supernatural in numerous epiphanic tales. Some examples:
- 21 *Crisis*: Classical scholars have variously enquired into why and in what kind of situations the ancients resorted to oracular divination.²⁴ They have found considerable overlap between the questions typically asked at an oracle in the epigraphic and material record (considered closer to reality) on the one hand, and the literary evidence on the other.²⁵ Both types of evidence, for example, feature the question of offspring and enquiries related to cult.²⁶ Revealing differences then emerge in the way in which these questions are framed: the literary evidence frequently presents them as part of a larger narrative in which disease and infertility serve as tropes to indicate divine disapproval of action taken by humans. In the epigraphic record, however, there is no evidence for such a reading of these problems.²⁷
- 22 I have already noted above that most questions asked at oracles were probably of a pretty straightforward nature. At Dodona, for example, people typically enquired as to how to find a wife, whether they would have children, how to prosper, and who was to blame for a theft.²⁸ In the literary sources, by contrast, consultations cluster around

problems that require (or allow for) more complex answers and that reach further into the future.²⁹ Yet such differences cannot obscure the fact that the term crisis — broadly conceived — aptly describes many (but not all) of the questions that were put to oracles for resolution, both in real life and in the literary (narrative) representation of the human/divine encounter.

- 23 *Authorization:* According to the epiphanic schema, the human/divine encounter frequently acts as a source of authority and legitimacy.³⁰ The reason for this is that the epiphanic experience (whether real or imaginary, or both) is considered a sign of the special favour of certain individuals in the eyes of the gods. By virtue of an epiphanic experience, the individual in question was θεοφιλής “dear to the gods”.³¹ Banking on the authority gained through their special relation with the divine, these individuals set out to solve the crisis, as in the famous case of the runner Pheidippides. After his encounter with Pan prior to the battle of Marathon, he was able to convince his fellow Athenians that the god had promised allegiance and support on the battlefield, thereby dispelling concerns about the absence of powerful human allies.³²
- 24 Oracular divination as represented in the literary evidence often fulfils a similar role. Examples abound of the oracular voice serving to authorise or legitimise assumptions of power.³³ Yet unlike epiphany, in which the person having the epiphanic experience is usually authorised to resolve the crisis, the person receiving the oracular prophecy is not necessarily the one to resolve the problem. In many instances, the oracle points to another person to provide help and leadership. For instance, at one time the Athenians were at a loss as to who should lead their efforts to colonise Thracian Chersonese.³⁴ They consulted the Delphic Oracle and were told to appoint Miltiades to guarantee success.
- 25 Here, someone other than those consulting the oracle is endorsed to step in as leader. Perhaps this is due to the fact that in epiphany, the gods were thought to choose those to whom they reveal themselves, whereas in divination it is the human enquirer who actively seeks divine advice. In epiphany, the human in question can thus present himself as singled out by the divine; this is hardly the case in oracular divination, where the human enquirer instigated contact. In the case of personal oracle consultations, the individual remained the pivot of the human/divine encounter.³⁵ In the case of civic enquiries, the individual merely acted on behalf of the *polis*, which explains why occasionally others can take the lead in carrying out the divine advice (as in the case involving Miltiades, discussed above).
- 26 *Resolution:* According to the epiphanic schema, the epiphanic experience either directly brings about the resolution to the crisis, or endorses an individual to do so with the apparent endorsement of the supernatural (see above).³⁶ Again, the same schema can be found in accounts of oracle consultations. The oracular voice itself — or the human intermediary authorised by it — provides resolution to the problem that motivated consultation in the first place.
- 27 In many oracle stories — just as in real-life consultations in which the oracle merely sanctions a proposed solution — the oracle is represented as resolving issues directly and straightforwardly. Herodotus relates that the people of the Egyptian cities of Marea and Apis asked at the Oracle of Zeus Ammon about their ethnic affiliation, hoping to qualify as Libyans in order to be able to consume beef; they were advised that they were Egyptians and therefore not permitted cows’ meat.³⁷ In other oracle stories, resolution is obfuscated by the notoriously enigmatic words of the oracle and the need

to interpret them correctly.³⁸ Either way, the encounter with divinity is represented here in a way that leads ultimately to the resolution of a conflict or crisis.

- 28 *Commemoration*: Yet what happens once a crisis is mitigated, and the oracle is successfully linked with its referent (meaning)? We move to the final aspect of the epiphanic schema: commemoration. Epiphanic encounters frequently lead to the creation of what Petridou has referred to as a “commemorative structure” — that is, “the establishment of a new cult, a festival, athletic games, divine images, or/and some other conspicuous cultic feature (e.g., sacrifices, theoric journey)”.³⁹ Similar forms of commemoration also attest to the consultation of oracles. As with instances of divine epiphany in which the epiphanic tale explains the establishment of a festival, cult or contest, oracular pronouncements frequently serve as *aitia* for such institutions.⁴⁰
- 29 In the oracle story reporting the struggle between Clazomenae and Cumae over the city of Leuce, the two *poleis* referred the problem to Delphi for solution.⁴¹ The Pythia said that those to offer first sacrifice would control Leuce and that each side should depart their own city the morning of the same day. The Clazomenians won, even though their city was further from the finish line. Prior to the race, they had founded a colony closer to Leuce — and set out from there. The fulfilment of the plan is followed by the establishment of the annual festival of the Prophthaseia (“Anticipation”), apparently commemorating the events leading up to their dominion over the city.⁴²
- 30 If this story is grounded in historical events, it is more likely that the existence of a festival of the Prophthaseia actually led to the invention of the oracle.⁴³ The story here probably inversed the chronological sequence of events to represent the festival as a pious form of commemorating the victory. In this case, the example would show how the narrative has reshaped the events from which it was derived to make it fit the epiphanic schema.
- 31 More specifically, this example illustrates how an aetiology accounts for events resulting in the establishment of a religious festival. The decision to honour the prophecy is made entirely by the Clazomenians themselves. In other instances, the oracle is represented as being involved more directly in a ‘commemorative structure’: when his friend Hephaiston died, Alexander is said to have consulted the Oracle of Zeus Ammon as to whether to honour him as a hero or a deity (Alexander had already started to bestow heroic honours). According to Arrian, the oracle responded that heroic honours were in order.⁴⁴ Another variant of the same story has it that the oracle even authorised divine honours.⁴⁵ Both variants present the festival as a consequence of the oracle. Again, one might ask whether it was not the other way around, with the oracle invoked *a posteriori* and the sequence inverted in the later narrative. Regardless, the festival points back to oracular revelation just as the pronouncement itself serves as source of authority and legitimacy for the festival.

Narrative, Cognition, and Revelation

- 32 Narrative, then, is key to how the epiphanic schema is enacted in both instances. It is narrative that turns the human encounter with the supernatural into a meaningful whole, presenting as a sequence the emergence of a crisis, the quest for a solution, and subsequent resolution with the help of the supernatural. Narrative relates how an individual may be authorised by the gods to take action to resolve the crisis and makes the connection between a human encounter with the supernatural and the subsequent

commemoration of this event through an object, institution, or ritual. In a very fundamental sense, then, narrative provides the medium through which the individual parts of the epiphanic schema are laid out, related to each other, and presented as part of a storyline. The final section of this article explores the role of narrative in conveying a sense of what the human/divine encounter entails in epiphanic and oracular tales. To this end, we return to the point made earlier in this article that both epiphanic tales and oracular tales are ultimately narratives about human cognition.

- 33 Cognitive studies, the discipline concerned with human thought processes, points to the manifold ways in which narrative relates to the mind and its modes of information-processing.⁴⁶ As Mark Turner succinctly put it, “narrative imagining — story — is the fundamental instrument of thought.”⁴⁷ It is intrinsic to how the human mind processes information, projects past experiences into the future, and retroactively links the events that led up to a particular point.⁴⁸ In short: Narrative is central to reasoning of all kinds — predictive or historical, analytic or intuitive.
- 34 The capacity to name phenomena in the world, to describe and relate them to each other, is key to this kind of reasoning. David Herman has pointed out that “mapping words onto worlds is a fundamental — perhaps the fundamental — requirement for narrative sense making.”⁴⁹ Applied to the study of religion, this observation points to the particular ways in which a religious tradition such as the ancient Greeks’ draws on different kinds of narratives to enact a certain perspective on the world and the human place within it. If religion really is a way of sense-making, as has frequently been argued, then narrative, as a main strategy whereby this sense-making occurs, should play a role in any efforts to understand the cognitive processes that give accounts of oracle consultations their typical form.⁵⁰
- 35 Classical studies has seen a recent surge of interest both in narrative and in cognitive approaches to the religions of the ancient world.⁵¹ Yet with very few exceptions, scholars in the field have not connected the two lines of current debate to use narrative as a way into the study of the thought processes that define the ancient Greek religious experience.⁵² As a result, the potential of the cognitive perspective for the study of religious narratives of all kinds — including oracular and epiphanic tales — has not yet been realised, despite the very promising results it has yielded in other areas of the Greek religious experience.
- 36 That both epiphanic tales and oracular tales feature human cognitive processes is clear if we consider the kind of stories they tell. As I have shown in the first section of this article, both types of narrative focus on the human response to the mediated emergence of divinity in the human realm. Both depict the human struggle to make sense of the supernatural through its various representations in the world. Yet epiphanic and oracular tales differ in the kind of response the divine presence evokes.
- 37 In epiphany, the focus is frequently on the wonder elicited by the supernatural in the human observer. Both Buxton and Petridou have pointed to an acute sense of astonishment as being the initial human response to an epiphanic encounter.⁵³ As Buxton has shown in his account of divine metamorphosis, “consternation is especially great in the absence of mitigation. Just as the depth of the gulf between mortality and immortality entails that a god who wishes safely to bridge that gulf must mitigate the disparity through metamorphosis, so any mortal who comes face to face with the true nature of divinity — as when the temporary veil of metamorphosis is lifted — will usually be awe-struck or dumbfounded.”⁵⁴ Yet *thambos* (“astonishment”) can also befall

those who behold a deity in disguise. In book three of the *Odyssey* Athena articulates her divine nature through her capacity to change form: ὥς ἄρα φωνήσας' ἀπέβη γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη φήνη εἰδομένη· θάμβος δ' ἔλε πάντας ἰδόντας. θαύμαζεν δ' ὁ γεραίός, ὅπως ἴδεν ὀφθαλμοῖσι, "So spoke the goddess, flashing-eyed Athena, and she departed in the likeness of a sea-eagle; and amazement fell upon everyone at the sight, and the old man marvelled, when his eyes beheld it."⁵⁵ This kind of human response to divine apparition highlights not only the nature of the gods in all their splendour but also the explosive manner in which the supernatural intervenes in the human sphere.

- 38 In oracular tales there may be wonder and astonishment, too — typically much later in the narrative. It is temporally displaced until the moment when the enigmatic divine response is matched with its real-world referent in a surprising act of fulfilment. This displacement opens up narrative space for what happens between the delivery of the oracle and its later fulfilment in the story.⁵⁶
- 39 The challenge of "mapping words onto worlds" seems particularly apt to describe the cognitive obstacles humans face right after the delivery of an enigmatic prophecy. In some sense, many such tales are about how the words of the oracle, at first enigmatic, always and inevitably find their referent in the real world. The "five greatest contests" from one oracle turn out to refer to five big battles.⁵⁷ "Zeus' greatest festival" (the subject of another response) points not to the Olympic Games in honour of Zeus, as one may have been tempted to think, but to a local Athenian festival, the Diasia.⁵⁸ And the breastplate (*thorax*) featured in a third oracle manifests as a hill of the same name.⁵⁹ Words and their meaning are indeed crucial to how humans make sense of the world with the help of the supernatural in oracular tales.
- 40 In epiphanic tales the cognitive challenge of matching words and worlds is different: it is not always clear from the beginning whether the supernatural has made any appearance at all. It is only after an epiphanic encounter has been firmly established that the task of correctly naming and linking apparition to relevant deity comes to the fore. In a story told by Herodotus, a husband is left to wonder just who bedded his wife after adopting human form — a delicate situation, resolved only after the husband is able to trace a garland left by the apparition to the hero Astrabacus.⁶⁰ And a tale from Pausanias draws on the authoritative voice of an unnamed oracle to identify the hero Cychreus as the one behind the apparition of a serpent during the battle of Salamis.⁶¹ In these and similar tales, the physical presence of the divine serves as a sign which — not unlike an enigmatic oracle — remains under-determined until it can be linked to its referent. In oracular tales and epiphanic tales alike, it is frequently the realization that something impossible or unexpected has occurred that indicates the divine presence.
- 41 Mapping words onto worlds, then, poses a challenge specific to the representation of oracular divination. Many oracular tales parade an astonishing lack of understanding of how it is that oracles 'mean' — astonishing because anyone even vaguely familiar with oracles will immediately think of readings alternative to the most obvious one. Not so the humans in the story. Many do not explore alternative avenues of interpretation before settling on a given course of action. However, the reader (particularly one familiar with oracles) constantly looks for alternative options, traps, and pathways until the moment in the narrative when the prediction is fulfilled.
- 42 In many oracular narratives, there is an implicit cognitive dissonance between the humans in the story on the one hand and the reader on the other. The former frequently engage in too literal a reading of the divine words and find their individual

hopes, ambitions, and desires disappointed. The latter, however, finds his or her own expectations of the oracles met in the unusual way in which the prophecy plays out. The indifference of the human consultants to how their expectations are not realised — a *topos* of numerous oracle stories — is juxtaposed with the astonishment of the reader at the marvellously unexpected ways in which the prophecy is inevitably fulfilled.⁶² Knowing and not knowing are enacted on different levels of the narrative.

- 43 In oracular tales, then, the challenge to anticipate the future presents itself as the challenge to make sense of the enigmatic worlds of the oracle and to transfer meaning successfully from the realm of the divine image to the present reality. In comparing and contrasting the present situation with possible future realities, these tales in effect implement a strategy which Turner, in his cognitive theory of narrative, has called “blending”. “Blending is the mental operation of combining two mental packets of meaning — two schematic frames of knowledge or two scenarios, for example — selectively and under constraints to create a third mental packet of meaning that has new, emergent meaning.”⁶³ The two frames of knowledge set side by side in oracular tales are (first) the entirety of past experiences of the humans in the story leading up to the consultation of the oracle, and (second) information about a future scenario as conveyed in the images and tropes of the oracular response. The blend consists of the human efforts to match experience and expectation, to connect past, present and future to a meaningful whole, and to find the referent of the oracle’s words in the here and now of the human world. In the framework of the story, it is in this blend that much of the cognitive work needed for humans to profit from divine foresight unfolds. Again, this is a feature of the way in which oracle stories draw on the *topos* of what an oracle consultation looks like. The epigraphical record knows no ambiguity and therefore no such blending occurs.
- 44 Take the famous story from Herodotus’ *Histories* in which the Athenians consider various possible interpretations of an oracle featuring an ominous “wooden wall” — a response delivered to a question about impending invasion by Persia.⁶⁴ In this instance, the procedure as related to us by Herodotus is complex: it takes two successive answers from the oracle to satisfy the Athenians that they have indeed received something to put to the assembly for discussion. The subsequent successful interpretation of the second oracle parades Themistocles’ interpretive powers just as much as his strategic foresight and his special link to the divine.
- 45 The cognitive challenge, mastered by the Athenians, is clearly outlined in the text and consists of two distinct cognitive operations: first, identify those words and phrases in the oracle that seem crucial to its meaning; second, consider different possible interpretations of the divine words and search for further clues to support them. Both operations are indeed separate in the way in which Herodotus tells the story. The ominous words are agreed upon first, before different interpretations are put forward.
- 46 It is no coincidence that Herodotus’ story turns on the “wooden wall” as a central metaphor. Metaphor is one of the main strategies by which the human mind can generate new meaning and make understanding possible.⁶⁵ This is because through metaphor and other related images (homonym, metonymy, synecdoche) information from one domain is juxtaposed with information from the other with the ultimate purpose of new understanding through a transfer of meaning from one to the other.⁶⁶
- 47 Oracular tales resemble epiphanic tales in some of the strategies used to mark out the narrative space of the blend, to signal divine presence, and to allow human cognition to

unfold: that of the (minimally) counter-intuitive.⁶⁷ Counter-intuitive phenomena are those things that violate the general ontological category to which they belong, for example by contradicting the features that are intuitively associated with members of that category.

- 48 Wooden walls might seem innocuous enough.⁶⁸ But what about a tall fighter sporting a beard so gigantic it covers his shield?⁶⁹ Or a serpent appearing on the battlefield?⁷⁰ Or a rock emitting human groans when struck by an arrow?⁷¹ Or ivy and the sounds of a flute appearing miraculously on the deck of a ship?⁷² These are all examples of things that, in one way or another, fall out of the frame of the plausible and expected. In epiphanic tales, these clues indicate that there is more to a particular apparition than meets the eye, inspiring human (cognitive) efforts to make sense of them in relation to the supernatural.
- 49 Narratives about oracles share with epiphanic tales a reliance on the category of the counter-intuitive. Many of the images invoked by oracular response to articulate divine knowledge also contradict those features intuitively associated with the ontological categories to which they belong. Neither in the human nor the divine world do triremes ever run on land,⁷³ do mules obtain regal standing,⁷⁴ or mortals persevere over immortals in battle.⁷⁵ Such things occur only in the blend — that is, in the narrative world of the oracular tale, in which the separation between experience and expectation, real and imaginary, and the different dimensions of time are temporarily cast aside to create a cognitive space in which these categories can come together in the mental operations of humans trying to make sense of divine words.
- 50 In Herodotus' story of the wooden wall, then, the interpretation of oracle revolves around considerations of likeness between the metaphor and its possible referents. What is like a wooden wall? What kind of qualities that inhere a wooden wall can be transferred onto other things in the world? The Athenians' answers are the direct outcome of such considerations: Some suggest that the wooden walls refer to the thorn-hedge fencing the Acropolis and that the oracle predicted the Acropolis would be saved. Themistocles interpreted the "wooden wall" to mean ships — and suggested the Athenians expand their navy. Both a hedge and a row of wooden ships are *like* a wooden wall, sharing not only the wooden quality but also the capacity to deter the enemy.
- 51 In the blend, (knowledge about) the future thus has an impact on the present — a constellation that occurs only in the blend and is not part of the original two scenarios or frames of knowledge it combines. Themistocles draws on his own experience and that of his Athenian audience to suggest a plausible and ultimately successful interpretation of the response. Herodotus provides us with a paradigmatic tale about the cognitive operations and persuasive processes that allow humans to establish meaning successfully in the human sphere. It stands in marked contrast to other tales in the *Histories* and elsewhere depicting how humans can go wrong in their efforts at making sense.
- 52 In Herodotus' tale, there is a direct cognitive link between the oracular image (the wooden wall) and its meaning (ships). In many other tales, however, there is no obvious connection between the different meanings of the oracle, and thus no transfer of knowledge between the oracle's referent and the oracular image that points to it. Homonyms for example lend themselves to this kind of wordplay: Argos the grove does not in any way resemble Argos the city.⁷⁶ Nor does Sicily the island have anything in common with a hill of the same name in Attica.⁷⁷ Nor, indeed, is there a deeper

connection between a horse and a rock of the same name — beyond any superficial physical likeness that may have inspired the naming of the rock, or the hill, or the grove.⁷⁸ No transfer of knowledge occurs from one meaning to the other. In these kind of tales, the link between language and the world is represented as more haphazard than one may first think. The point here is precisely that there are more phenomena in the world that bear the same name than humans may be inclined to imagine.

Conclusion

- 53 This article raised the question of the relationship between oracular tales and epiphanic tales. I argued that both kinds of narrative raise fundamental religious questions about the nature of the divine and its availability to human knowledge. I further proposed that a cognitive approach is uniquely suited to explore the religious issues explored in both kinds of evidence.
- 54 Throughout the article, I showed that both oracle stories and epiphanic tales draw on narrative and storytelling to convey a sense of what the human/divine encounter entails. The epiphanic scheme which Petridou presented as central to epiphanic tales can also be found in modified form in numerous oracular narratives. Like epiphanic tales, many oracular tales are structured as a narrative sequence which starts from a crisis, followed by the authorisation of a solution by the oracle, which in turn enables the resolution of the conflict or problem that originally triggered the consultation of the oracle.
- 55 Narrative sequence, however, raises questions of causation: every ‘and then’ potentially implies a ‘because’. Revealing differences then emerged in the way in which both epiphanic narratives and oracular narratives represent the cognitive challenges at the heart of the human/divine encounter. Although both kinds of narrative can be seen to draw on the categories of the counter-intuitive and imply strategies of narrative blending, they differ in the way in which they present the subsequent human response to the divine presence in the human realm. While epiphanic tales focus on the intuitive responses of astonishment and surprise, oracular tales feature — and sometimes enact — the cognitive processes humans must successfully run through in order to make sense of the divine words and to benefit from the superior knowledge of the supernatural.

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NOTES

1. Recent studies on epiphany: PLATT (2011); PETRIDOU (2015). See also VERSNEL (1987). On divine representation in the human sphere see also GAIFMAN (2012).
2. Some recent studies on inspired divination: JOHNSTON (2008); USTINOVA (2009); BEERDEN (2013); KAJAVA (2013); TRAMPEDACH (2015); KINDT (2016).
3. I first floated the idea of oracle stories being a form of epiphanic tale in the conclusion to KINDT (2016) without elaborating it in any detail.
4. On *katabasis* and the rituals involved in the consultation of the oracle of Trophonius at Labadeia see the comprehensive study of BONNECHERE (2003), in particular p. 131–217, p. 354–358.
5. On divine disguises see BUXTON (2009), p. 157–190, BUXTON (2010); and, most recently, PETRIDOU (2015), p. 29–105.
6. On Epidaurus see now RENEBERG (2017), p. 126–133.
7. See e.g. Zeus visiting Alcmene disguised as her husband Amphytrion, who discovered that he had been cuckolded by consulting the seer Tiresias (Apollod. 2.4.7–8). For a similar example see the tale of the wife of Ariston as told by Herodotus 6.69. She relies on diviners to find out that it was the hero Astrabacus (disguised as her husband) who had fathered her child.
8. On divine disguises see above, note 3.
9. On this point see VERNANT (1991a), p. 45.
10. Plutarch, himself a priest at Delphi, names the questions “if they shall be victorious, if they shall marry, if it is to their advantage to sail the sea, if to take to farming, if to go abroad” as typical enquiries at Delphi (Plut. *De E.* 5).
11. See e.g. MANETTI (1993); VERNANT (1991b); KINDT (2016), p. 63–69, p. 146–148.
12. See e.g. VERNANT (1991a), p. 44–49; BUXTON (2009), p. 158–164; PETRIDOU (2015), p. 30.
13. See VERNANT (1991a), p. 44 with examples.
14. *HHymAph.* 5.181–3 (transl. WEST [2003]).
15. The anthropomorphism of Greek divinity: PETRIDOU (2015), p. 32–43; HENRICHS (2010); OSBORNE (2011), p. 185–215.
16. Anthropomorphic divine statues: STEINER (2011). On aniconic divine statues see GAIFMAN (2012).
17. In divine zoomorphism, language cannot serve as a means of communication between gods and men.
18. Epiphany as a visual experience: e.g. Paus. 1.39.1. Epiphany and sound: e.g. Paus. 1.32.4. Epiphany and scent: *HHymDem.* 2.101.
19. Paus. 9.39.11. On the kind of senses involved in the revelation offered by the oracle of Trophonius see BONNECHERE (2013), p. 148–154 (for the larger procedure see p. 139–164). See BONNECHERE (2013), p. 342–344 for a systematic comparison of Aristophanes’ *Clouds* and Pausanias as evidence for the ritual at the oracle of Trophonius.
20. See e.g. Hdt. 1.53.3, 1.55.2 (Croesus), Soph. *OT* 791–793; 994–996 (Oedipus).

21. Hom. *Od.* 13.312–313 (transl. MURRAY and DIMOCK [1995]).
22. PETRIDOU (2015), p. 18.
23. As do prayers, vows, and oaths, which are frequently also presented as resolutions of crises. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me.
24. The *locus classicus* here remains FONTENROSE (1978) for the Delphic Oracle. On this point see also BOWDEN (2005), p. 109–133.
25. See e.g. FONTENROSE (1978), p. 39 for a table of the questions featuring in different kinds of sources for the Delphic oracle.
26. See e.g. FONTENROSE (1978), p. 39, 48 for Delphi.
27. In both types of evidence, the problem leading up to a consultation of an oracle could also occur at different levels of society, at one time affecting an individual, at another the whole community.
28. The questions typically put to Dodona: LHÔTE (2006).
29. A few examples: on disease see e.g. Diog. Laert. 1.10.110; Plut. *Mor.* 245c, 310b; Hdt. 1.19.3; Paus. 9.38.3; on offspring and infertility see e.g. Diod. Sic. 8.17.1; Hdt. 5.92b.2., Xen. *Cyr.* 7.2.19, Hdt. 9.33.2.
30. PETRIDOU (2015), p. 18–19.
31. On reciprocity in the human/divine relationship see now LARSON (2016), p. 40–47.
32. Herodotus 6.105–106 with PETRIDOU (2015), p. 13–20.
33. A few examples from Delphi: Nep. 1.3, Hdt. 4.161.2, E. *Ion* 70–71, Paus. 5.4.3, Ar. *Plut.* 41–43.
34. Nep. 1.3.
35. On ancient Greek personal religion see now KINDT (2015).
36. Resolution and the ‘epiphanic schema’: PETRIDOU (2015), p. 18–20.
37. Hdt. 2.18.2.
38. On enigmatic prophecies see in detail KINDT (2016), p. 159–164.
39. PETRIDOU (2015), p. 19.
40. On oracles as *aitia*: KINDT (2016), p. 162. Further examples of aetiological tales including oracles: Dem. 21.52, Paus. 5.4.6, Hdt. 5.82.1–2, Plin. *HN* 36.4.10, 6.3.8, 7.17.6, Paus. 1.3.4, 3.18.1, 8.42.6, 8.23.7.
41. Diod. Sic. 15.18.1–4.
42. It may well be the case that in the chronological sequence of events as presented in the narrative has to be inverted and that the existence of a festival ultimately led to the invention of the narrative including the oracle. Yet this would not change what can be deduced about the way in which the human/divine contact is represented here.
43. In Greek religion the existence of a ritual often led to the construction of a narrative explaining it.
44. Arr. 7.14.7. See also the alternative variant of the story at Diod. Sic. 17.115.6. and Plut. *Alex.* 72.
45. Paus. 8.42.6.
46. Some foundational studies: LAKOFF – TURNER (1989); TURNER (1996), (2014); TURNER – FAUCONNIER (2002); HERMAN (2003), (2009), (2013).
47. TURNER (1996), p. 5.
48. See in detail TURNER (1996), p. 3–11, in particular p. 9.
49. HERMAN (2016), p. 71.
50. Religion as a way of sense making: GOULD (2001) drawing on GEERTZ (1973), p. 87–125.
51. Religion and narrative: KINDT (2006); EIDINOW (2011); RAPHALS (2013), p. 279–315; PETRIDOU (2015), p. 12; WILLEY (2016). JOHNSTON (2017a), (2017b). Cognitive approaches towards the study of the religions of the ancient world: e.g. USTINOVA (2009); KINDT (2012), p. 36–54; LARSON (2016); STRUCK (2016); EIDINOW (2017); LOTT (2017).

52. It is probably futile to speculate on why this may be the case, but it would not be far off the mark to suggest that the association of narrative with the realm of the literary and the unreal have something to do with it. For a comprehensive refutation of this view see again TURNER (1996). On the potential of cognitive approaches to the study of ancient Greek religion see also HARRISON (2015).
53. BUXTON (2009), p. 164–168; PETRIDOU (2015), e.g. p. 110.
54. BUXTON (2009), p. 164.
55. Hom. *Od.* 3.371–373 (transl. MURRAY and DIMOCK [1995]).
56. In real-life oracle consultations, the picture is slightly different. Here the voice of the prophet(ess) was the medium for the human/divine contact. In places like the oracle of Trophonius at Lebadeia, where the contact was direct, *thambos* (“astonishment”) was certainly present and part of the religious experience (see also USTINOVA [2009], p. 90–96).
57. Hdt. 9.33.2. On enigmatic divine language see in detail KINDT (2016), p. 159–164.
58. Thuc. 1.126.4.
59. Strab. 14.1.39.
60. Hdt. 6.69.
61. Paus. 1.36.1–2.
62. On the difference between the readers of the story and humans in the story see also KINDT (2016), p. 24–29.
63. TURNER – FAUCONNIER (2002), p. 10.
64. Hdt. 7.140–143. There is a rich scholarly literature on this particular tale. See HARRISON (2000), p. 193–195; BOWDEN (2006), p. 100–107 with references.
65. TURNER – FAUCONNIER (2002). Turner argues that “far from being merely a matter of words, metaphor is a matter of thought — all kinds of thought: thought about emotion, about society, about human character, about language, and about the nature of life and death. It is indispensable not only to our imagination but also to our reason” (TURNER – FAUCONNIER [2002], p. xi). Of course, this use of metaphor is not limited to oracles. It was pervasive in other areas of Greek thought and literature, too, including those of aetiology, medicine, and philosophy.
66. There are many examples of oracular tales in which metaphor (or the related tropes of metonymy and synecdoche) are used to encourage the transfer of knowledge from one area to another. See MAURIZIO (1993), (2001) with examples.
67. On the category of the counter-intuitive and its significance to cognitive approaches towards ancient Greek religion see now LARSON (2016), p. 19–21.
68. According to Homer’s *Iliad*, the Greeks erected walls to protect their beached ships from the onslaught of the Trojan, yet it is unclear what material was used. See Hom. *Il.* 7.433–441.
69. Hdt. 6.117.1.
70. Paus. 1.36.1.
71. Paus. 1.39.2–3.
72. Apollod. 3.5.2–3.
73. Paus. 1.37.7.
74. Hdt. 1.55.
75. Paus. 10.1.4.
76. Hdt. 6.76.1, 82.2.
77. *Suda* σ 389.
78. *Suda* δ 99; Val. Max. 1.8 ext. 8. See also Cic. *Fat.* 3.5 (Posidonius).

ABSTRACTS

This article compares and contrasts the representation of epiphany and inspired divination in Greek literature. Narrative provides a way to compare epiphanic and oracular tales, and to investigate the cognitive processes at their cores. Both oracular tales and epiphanic tales not only contain similar themes, *topoi*, and narrative structures, but also revolve around common problems of cognition and human knowledge of the supernatural. This suggests that oracular tales constitute a form of epiphanic tale. Cognitive analysis ultimately reveals that epiphanic and oracular tales accentuate different aspects of the same challenges individuals face when trying to make sense of the supernatural.

Cet article met en regard et compare la représentation des épiphanies et la divination inspirée dans la littérature grecque. Les textes ouvrent la voie à une comparaison entre des récits d'épiphanies et des récits oraculaires, et permettent d'étudier les processus cognitifs en leur sein. Ces deux types de récits, non seulement intègrent des thèmes, des *topoi*, et des structures narratives similaires, mais ils tournent également autour des mêmes problèmes de cognition et d'appréhension humaine du surnaturel. Ce constat suggère le fait que les récits oraculaires constituent une forme de récits d'épiphanies. L'analyse cognitive révèle finalement que ces deux types de récits soulignent différents aspects des défis identiques auxquels les individus font face quand ils tentent de donner sens au surnaturel.

AUTHOR

JULIA KINDT

Department of Classics and Ancient History
The University of Sydney
Julia.Kindt@sydney.edu.au