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0521823730 - Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle: Divination and Democracy

Hugh Bowden

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Introduction

What is the relationship between religion and democracy? More precisely, to what extent should religious considerations affect the decisions taken by citizens in a democracy? In the modern world it is generally thought that religion and politics occupy, or should occupy, separate spheres. Religion may promote moral goodness, and moral goodness may be considered desirable in a community, but the idea of giving preference to the divine will – however it might be established – over the will of the people – as revealed by a vote – would be seen as fundamentally undemocratic. This understanding pervades not only approaches to modern democracies, but also the study of democracy in the ancient world. While the nature of religion in ancient Greece, and ancient Athens in particular, has been a subject of increased study in the last few decades, the question of what influence, if any, the gods might have on decision-making in democratic Athens has been rather neglected. It is the contention of this book that decision-making in democratic Athens was heavily influenced by concern to establish and to follow the will of the gods.¹

Such an emphasis on obedience to the will of the gods, or God, is usually associated with ideologies labelled ‘fundamentalist’ rather than ‘democratic’. At first sight it might be difficult to see any common ground between the society of ancient Athens, and that advocated or imposed by, for example, fundamentalist Christian movements in North America or groups like the Taliban in Afghanistan. For a start fundamentalists, whether Islamic or Christian or Jewish, claim to draw their authority from a sacred text – the Koran or the Bible – while it is an often repeated comment that ‘Greek religion had no sacred books . . . no revelation, no creed.’²

¹ Recent books on religion in Greece: Burkert (1985), Easterling and Muir (1985), Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel (1992), Price (1999); on Athens: Mikalson (1983), Yunis (1988), Garland (1992), Parker (1996).

² Quotation: Finley (1985: xiv).

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This contrast is an oversimplification on both sides. Texts like the Bible and the Koran require interpretation, and studies of fundamentalism suggest that ‘correct interpretation’ is commonly a matter for considerable debate amongst the leaders of groups, but that it is much less a concern for their followers. For most members of fundamentalist groups doctrine is less important than correct practice, whether this relates to ritual activity or personal behaviour: it is enough to know what one ought to do, and that there is authority for it. As a result the teachings and traditions of the group have more of an impact on its members than the words of the sacred book itself. On the other side, even though the Athenians had no single sacred book, they did have the means of establishing the will of the gods, both through their own traditions and by the use of divination. There were collections of written oracles, some kept by cities, some circulating in the hands of individuals, which might be consulted or referred to in political debates, and which were considered to be divinely inspired. The interpretation of these oracles was considered a skill, and interpretations might be subject to debate, just as the interpretation of passages of the Koran or the Bible have been and still are. Other forms of divination are better known, including the inspection of the entrails of sacrificed animals and above all the consultation of oracular shrines. Like written texts, the marks on an animal’s liver, or the words spoken by a priest or priestess at an oracular sanctuary, were recognised as meaningful signs inspired by a god or gods.³

There are other ways in which the society of classical Athens looks surprisingly similar to that found in real and imagined fundamentalist societies, for example in the limitations placed on women’s activities, the absence of a clear distinction between the public and private spheres of life and the encouragement of mass participation in social activities. Comparisons like these are important because they warn us against making assumptions about the nature of ancient democracy. In modern discussions, ‘democratic’ or more properly perhaps ‘Western democratic’ regimes are assumed to be liberal, individualist, capitalist and secularist. Democratic Athens was none of these things. An exploration of how the Athenians understood their relationship to the gods will offer a better understanding not only of ancient Athens, but perhaps also of the relationship between religion and politics in other societies.⁴

³ On the nature of fundamentalist groups: Marty and Appleby (1991); Garvey (1993: 15–17). On collections of written oracles see Bowden (2003a).

⁴ On the fundamentalist rejection of the distinction between public and private, and mass participation: Garvey (1993: 13–17). The fictional Christian fundamentalist regime depicted in

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The way in which religion functions in societies tends to be explained in two ways. One way is to emphasise its role in regulating social relations within a community. Religious activity can reinforce social norms, and provide means of resolving disagreements. As one scholar has put it in her discussion of oracles in ancient Greece:

Oracles . . . sanction decisions taken on the basis of the accumulated wisdom of community leaders . . . Divination is valuable for its ability (at least in theory) to oppose authority, and to serve as a resistance mechanism, hence ensuring that leaders are not seen to act entirely on their own initiative over matters where dispute would seem possible or likely. Furthermore, as Robert Parker has emphasised, the decision to seek such a sanction implies acceptance of an obligation to act according to the will of the god, and thus the sign which is sought acquires greater authority than that which offers itself. Divination may therefore be seen as *a tool to eliminate disorder and to establish a consensus of opinion in favour of a particular solution* to a difficult problem . . . Nevertheless, whilst divine legitimation may be effective in ensuring a consensus of opinion, since a community has to live with the consequences of any oracular response, the eventual success of any enterprise must depend upon the policies formulated before consultation; oracles are not a substitute for the decision-making organisation of a community . . . Although one might wonder whether there was any real practical point in troubling with consultation, *the potential political and social value of the response should not be underestimated.*⁵

If this was how religion always functioned, then, as Morgan herself suggests, following the will of the gods would always be the same as following the will of the community. Divination would make some difficult decisions easier by reframing the issues at stake, and give the appearance of external authority for those decisions, making it easier to reconcile members of the society to them. This is the approach that has become normal in explaining the place of divination, and of oracles in particular, in ancient Greek society. It has replaced an earlier view, which treated the consultation of oracles as little more than a charade, with answers manipulated by the men who controlled the oracular sanctuaries. But while this approach takes oracles seriously, it still plays down their importance: all divination does is to give communities a different way of reaching the same decisions.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is very similar to classical Athens in the roles it gives to women: Atwood (1986). On Athens as illiberal and collectivist: Osborne (1994). Marty and Appleby (1993: 4–8) question the assumption of a necessary opposition between fundamentalism and all possible forms of democracy.

⁵ Morgan (1990: 153–4), referring to Parker (1985: 298), italics mine.

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There is a further problem. As we will see, the literary evidence used to support this picture of how oracles actually worked is not necessarily reliable. The current orthodoxy is based largely on the accounts of Herodotus, the most important, but not necessarily the most straightforward source of evidence for early Greek history. If, as we shall see, Herodotus' depiction of consultations, and the debates surrounding them, cannot be trusted, then the current orthodoxy has problems.⁶

There is another way of looking at the role of religion in societies. Religion offers a way of explaining and dealing with contingency: that is, in explaining external forces, such as good and bad harvests, epidemics, natural disasters like earthquakes, and success or failure in war. While a religious system concerned with internal order will attribute to its gods a concern for justice and law, one that recognises contingency will present them as capricious and potentially dangerous, always needing to be conciliated. Most religious traditions, including that of the Greeks, have elements of both these kinds of depiction. The Judaeo-Christian tradition for the most part presents God as an omniscient guarantor of justice, so for example in the books of the Hebrew Bible written during and after the period of Israelite exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC, the fall of the Israelite kingdom is explained not as the success of the gods of Babylon, but as punishment of Israel by its own God, for its failings. In contrast the dominant strand of Greek literature, from Homer onwards, can portray the gods as partisan, changeable and open to persuasion, so that Greek success and failure on the battlefield of Troy, for example, is determined by the intrigues of the gods.⁷

Events attributed to divine action were usually those that could not be explained by human wisdom: epidemics were not understood until the nineteenth century; many climatic events are still beyond human understanding and control; 'chance' remains a recognised element in explaining the outcome of wars. A consequence of this is that when a community seeks a solution to such a problem from the gods it cannot test its correctness against human standards of 'rationality'. The answer has to be taken on trust. Because of this the responses to what was seen as divine action developed by Greek communities might not necessarily be consistent with the best interests of the community at other times. As we will see,

⁶ Approaches reliant on Herodotus: e.g. Price (1999: 74), Maurizio (2001). On Herodotus see chapter 3.

⁷ Israelite defeat and divine punishment: e.g. Jer. 37.3–40.6; cf. Gerstenberger (2002: 215–53). Gods and Greeks at Troy: e.g. Hom. *Il.* 14.154–15.77.

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the need to conciliate the gods, and the recognition of the danger of ignoring them, might lead communities to act in ways that went against their immediate interests. The Jewish historian Josephus describes how, because of their observance of the Sabbath, Jewish fighters were put at a great disadvantage in their war with Rome – but to break the laws about the Sabbath would have been to break their covenant with God. Dependent on maintaining good relations with the gods, Greek communities might have found themselves similarly constrained if the results of divination turned out awkwardly.⁸

We can see how Greek communities would regularly establish the attitude of the gods if we look at the most common form of divination in the Greek world, hepatoscopy or liver divination. Sheep, and other animals, would be sacrificed and their entrails examined on many occasions. In particular this was a regular ritual at every stage of a military campaign, first when setting off, then when crossing a frontier, and before the start of a battle, and also whenever a change of action was proposed. Although there were ‘professional’ seers (*manteis*) whose abilities in interpreting livers and other forms of divination were particularly valued, the principles of reading livers could be learned by anyone. There were established ways of interpreting the shape and markings of a liver which meant that anyone looking at the same liver ought to be able to draw the same conclusions from it. Since usually the question posed when a liver was examined would require a yes/no answer – ‘Should we advance now?’, ‘Should we attack now?’ – interpretation would not need to be subtle. It was common practice to sacrifice a series of sheep, either in the hopes that as time went by unfavourable circumstances might change, or making different proposals each time to try to find one that would gain divine approval.⁹

Usually, it would appear, the consultation would be a formality, but historians report a number of occasions where troops found themselves in serious danger and were unable to move because their sacrifices would not produce favourable results. At the Battle of Plataea in 479 BC, according to Herodotus, Spartan infantry, although under attack from Persian archers, and suffering heavy casualties, did not advance for some considerable time while they waited for the sacrifices to come right. The fourth-century Athenian writer Xenophon describes an occasion when the mercenaries with whom he served were held up in hostile territory and short of food,

⁸ On Sabbath observance at all costs: Joseph. *BJ* 2.392–4; cf. 1.61, 1.146, 2.634.

⁹ Liver divination: Burkert (1992: 46–53); illustrations in Lissarrague (1989: 48). *Manteis*: Bowden (2003a).

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and the entrails forbade them either to move on or even to go out foraging for supplies, for several days. These events caused enormous resentment and discord within the mercenary band, but most of the soldiers accepted the necessity of following the guidance of divination, even when it put their lives at risk.¹⁰

Hepatoscopy was literally an everyday occurrence in democratic Athens. In some circumstances more elevated methods of divination were required, and on such occasions ambassadors were sent to the sanctuaries of gods noted for their oracular powers. Of these the most important, and the one about which we have most information, was that of Apollo at Delphi. This was consulted by the Athenians on twenty-eight occasions that we know of before 300 BC, and no doubt many others of which we have no record. Sending an embassy to Delphi was no minor matter, and in the fourth century the procedure in Athens before the embassy set off could be very elaborate. A close analysis of what the Athenians consulted Delphi on, and under what circumstances, will reveal something of the importance of the gods in decision-making.

How we understand the working of oracles is important for how we explain their role. Broadly speaking, the current orthodoxy suggests that the actual consultation of an oracle was not the crucial moment in the process of decision making. On those issues where there was a disagreement to be resolved, it is argued, the oracular response would itself be debated, and what had been a debate about two possible courses of action would become a debate about the meaning of the god's response. This kind of interpretation often focuses on the ambiguity of some oracular responses, a topic that will be addressed later. On those issues where a community was looking for support for a significant innovation, such as a change of constitution, it is argued, one aspect of the innovation might be left to the god to decide on, and support for the part was taken as support for the whole. These explanations seek to minimise the effect of oracles on Greek communities, and they make assumptions about the way oracles were used that are not supported by all the available evidence. In contrast to this orthodoxy I will argue that Athens, and by implication other Greek states, consulted oracles on matters which could not be resolved by debate, and on major issues that might have profound consequences for themselves. I will also argue that they looked for, and received, unambiguous answers to the questions they asked, and that they followed the advice.

¹⁰ Repeated sacrifices: Hdt. 9.61–2; Xen. *An.* 6.4.22, *Hell.* 4.1.22; Bowden (2004).

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If we ask what was important to the Athenians in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, it is clear that matters both of internal order and of external forces were of concern. For two reasons, however, we tend to pay more attention to the internal working of the Athenian democracy than to questions of disease, harvest and the fortunes of war. The first reason is the nature of the evidence. Inevitably those areas which produced disputes that could be settled by human argument and debate are more reflected in the surviving literature from the democracy than those areas where decisions had to be handed over to the gods. The law-courts, in particular, and to some extent the Assembly, were places where political rivals could fight for influence within Athens, and it is the material produced for these arenas, in the form of the speeches of the Attic orators, that provides the basis for most studies of how the democracy functioned. Thucydides, the historian who has most to say on the actions of the democracy in the second half of the fifth century, is himself also more interested in those aspects of life which are open to human influence than in those which are not. The second reason that the internal working of the democracy receives the bulk of the attention is because it is apparently so similar to modern western democratic politics. It is easy to recognise the common elements, even while noticing the obvious differences.¹¹

Concentration on the mechanisms of democracy – elections, debating and then voting on proposals – tends to obscure fundamental differences between the concerns of ancient and modern societies. When historians think about the activities of the Athenian assembly, as likely as not what they think about is Thucydides' account of the debate about the revolt of Mytilene on Lesbos, or Xenophon's account of the trial of the generals after the battle of Arginusae. These are exciting depictions of the clashes between politicians that are taken to symbolise the nature of Athenian politics during the Peloponnesian War. In truth however they are debates over limited subjects: in the first case the question of how many Mytileneans should be killed (in the event the more lenient proposal was accepted, and even that saw 1,000 men executed), in the second the means of trial of a group of generals. Furthermore, even this kind of debate may have been the exception rather than the rule, and the closeness of the voting in the Mytilene debate must have been rare. Another debate described by Thucydides, concerned with the launch of the expedition against Sicily,

¹¹ Thucydides brings out the role of *to anthropinon*, 'the way humans are' (1.22.4); cf. Cogan (1981). This can be contrasted with Herodotus' acceptance of a role for *to theion*, 'the divine' (e.g. 1.32.1, 3.40.2, 7.167.1, 9.100.2).

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is presented as being far from close when it came to voting. There are reasons to suppose that much of the business of the assembly was rather different from these examples in any case. The orator Aeschines, speaking in 345 BC, describes the business of the assembly like this:

After the purificatory victims [that is, sacrificed piglets] have been carried around, and the herald has said the ancestral prayers, the law commands the *proedroi* [the presiding magistrates] to proceed with discussion concerning ancestral sacred matters (*hiera*), heralds and embassies, and other matters of civic concern (*hosion*).

The pseudo-Aristotelean *Athenian Constitution*, probably written a little later, confirms that this is the pattern of ordinary Assembly meetings, and adds other information about fixed items of business at some Assembly meetings. It is likely that agendas were more flexible in the fifth century than in the fourth, but nevertheless the implication of this is that in the business of the democracy, relations with the gods took priority over other matters. Given that heralds and ambassadors were considered to be under the special protection of the gods, and that correct treatment of them was of paramount importance for fear of incurring divine wrath, the ‘religious’ elements of this list go down a long way.¹²

A further feature that is likely to have made the Athenian democracy less like modern Western democracies, and more likely to pay attention to the wishes of the gods ahead of anything else, is the way that Athenian society, and above all the upbringing of Athenian boys, was organised. A rather oversimplified view of Athenian upbringing will contrast the regimentation of the Spartan *agoge* with the much less centrally controlled education of Athenians. However, all Athenian men belonged to various associations, into which they were introduced at various stages. They would be members of a family and household, with its own regular religious rites, including cults of household gods. They would be members of wider kinship groups, including the phratry; in some cases they would belong to a *genos* or a group of *orgeones*, both of which were groups with specific religious responsibilities. They would belong to political and military groups, which were also kinship groups: their deme, their tribe, and the city as a whole. Each of these groups had its religious aspects, and meetings would be associated with religious festivals or other celebrations. As members of these groups, citizens would be imbued with ideas of group solidarity, bound by the support of the gods, important perhaps above all when its members were

¹² Mytilene: Thuc. 3.36–50. Arginusae: Xen. *Hell.* 1.7.1–35. Sicily: Thuc. 6.8–26. Regular business: Aeschin. 1.23; [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 43.4–6. On the meaning of *hiera* and *hosia*: Connor (1988).

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fighting together as hoplite soldiers – probably only a minority of each group actually were hoplites, but the ideology was pervasive. It has been recognised that the religious ideology of Athens, which the religious substructure we have noted will have supported, encouraged a positive view of war. It also will have encouraged respect for the gods that made Athens successful in war, as in other areas of life. Appeals to citizens brought up in this climate will have been made in religious terms as much as in terms of private benefit.¹³

Other evidence also points towards the importance of religious issues within the running of the democracy. Democratic Athens was noted for the large number of public festivals it held, and it is clear that these took up a significant amount of the time of the men administering the city, and large amounts of money, both of the state and of its richest citizens. In a partially surviving speech written by Lysias, a young Athenian lists his expenditure on behalf of the city during the period 411–404 BC, the time of the Ionian War, when Athens was fighting and losing its war with Sparta, and when several major naval battles were fought. The speaker paid for a number of choruses for various religious festivals, and for the cost of manning and operating triremes. Even at this time of desperate warfare, his expenditure on festival choruses was considerably greater than on the navy. Studies of the amount of money spent by the Athenians on sacrificial animals for the major public festivals also suggests that very large sums went on these aspects of religious life. It is true that much of the benefit went to the citizens who actually ate most of the sacrificial meat paid for at public expense, but that does not detract from the emphasis that the spending was conceived of primarily in religious terms. Those who spend money giving friends an expensive dinner do not do so thinking primarily of its nutritional value to themselves, and in the same way the sacrifices were considered to be a meal shared between citizens and gods. The purpose of these festivals is, in the first instance, to please the gods, and there was a well-established idea that one of the main functions of a city was to provide festivals to please the gods. In the earliest literary depiction of a Greek city that survives, that of the imaginary cities on the shield of Achilles in Book 18 of the *Iliad*, the poet shows a festival being celebrated, along with agricultural labour, warfare and the administration of justice.¹⁴

¹³ On associations in Athens: Whitehead (1986), Osborne (1990), Lambert (1993), Jones (1999). On their socialising influence: Osborne (1994), Connor (1996).

¹⁴ Festivals: Thuc. 2.38.1; [Xen.] *Ath. pol.* (= 'The Old Oligarch') 3.2; Mikalson (1975). Young Athenian: Lys. 21.1–5. Sacrificial animals: Rosivach (1994). Sacrifice and shared meals: Connor (1988: 184–5), Schmitt Pantel (1992). Achilles' shield: Hom. *Il.* 18.478–608.

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It is clear then, that religious matters played an important part in the political or administrative life of Athens. Religion and the gods were also important in those aspects of the lives of ordinary Athenians which were not directly related to politics. The vast majority of Athenians were engaged in agriculture, either as large landowners, small-holders, tenant farmers or seasonal agricultural labourers. Variability of harvest was – and still is – a natural part of a farmer's life in Greece, and they engaged in a variety of strategies to limit risk, including encouraging scattered land-holding and storage of surpluses to even out shortfalls in poor years. They will also have sought divine assistance. For example, in an inscription probably from c. 435 BC recording the institution of a festival offering the 'first-fruits' of the wheat and barley harvests to Demeter and Kore at Eleusis (discussed in detail later on), those who participate are promised 'abundance of good harvests' as a reward.¹⁵

The other major part of the life of Athenians was war. As has been mentioned, the religious ideology of Athens presented war as a glorious thing. There are in Athenian literature negative presentations of war and its effects, but generally it would seem that the benefits brought by winning outweighed any disadvantages. As the discussion of hepatoscopy indicated, military campaigns were occasions of frequent consultation of the gods, combined, inevitably on every occasion when victims' livers had to be examined, with the sacrifice of animals to the gods. Other forms of divination might be used at various stages of a campaign. It was standard practice to dedicate a portion of the spoils of a successful campaign to the gods – the decision as to which gods were so honoured seems to have varied from campaign to campaign. Clearly then, the gods were recognised as playing an important role in the outcome of battles. This was illustrated – literally – in the picture of the Battle of Marathon displayed in the Painted Stoa in the Athenian Agora, which depicted Athena, Theseus and Heracles along with the human combatants. Other literary accounts of that battle, and of others in the classical period, recognise the gods as combatants, a tradition that goes back to Homer.¹⁶

What this discussion has shown is that there were large parts of the life of Athenian citizens that were considered to be very much subject to the

¹⁵ Limiting risk: Gallant (1991). First-fruits: see chapter 5 [13].

¹⁶ Negative portrayal of war: e.g. Eur. *Tro*. Dedication of spoils: Pritchett (1971: 93–100); on war and religion more generally: Lonis (1979), Pritchett (1979). Painted Stoa: Paus. 1.15.4, cf. Francis and Vickers (1985), Camp (1992: 66–72). On gods at Marathon in general: Bowden (forthcoming). Gods fighting in Homer: e.g. Hom. *Il.* 5.720–909.