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CAVES AND THE ANCIENT GREEK MIND

Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth

YULIA USTINOVA

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Preface

My interest in cave experiences was born during a tour of prehistoric caverns in France. I realized that cave paintings and engravings are largely misrepresented in book reproductions of parietal art. Only live encounter with images emerging from the rock, in the dark coolness of a cavern deep in the earth, can give some idea of the power of parietal art, and even then artificial lighting, and above all the cultural background of the modern observer, lessen the sense of awe and admiration. The question that puzzled me was what motivated a human being, *Homo sapiens* exactly like us, to clamber down, encumbered with lamps and pigments, hundreds of metres into an enormously long and frightening cave, in order to depict there animals and mysterious signs? As a classical scholar, I also wondered whether ancient Greeks did something really important in caves, and could not then remember much.

Back home, I looked through some works on parietal art. The eye-opener was the book by David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* (London, 2002). The author compellingly demonstrates that the activities of the Cro-Magnons in caverns were 'the matter of mind', and that it was mental imagery of shamanistic trances that led the prehistoric painters to image-making in the depth of the caves. I also looked for some examples of Greek cave experiences, and was surprised to discover that, more often than not, they were associated with various mystic states. The crossover of the two themes fascinated me. When asked by colleagues what I was working on, I said that the subject was 'The Greek Mind in the Cave'.

This book owes a considerable debt to help and support of many people and organizations. The research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant No. 557/05). I am grateful to my own institution, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, which provided me with excellent conditions to accomplish this project. I thank my colleagues at the University, Lucien (Uri) Poznanski, Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, and Mayer Gruber, for their generous help, support, and

advice. It is a pleasure to acknowledge my debt to Chaya Galai, who edited the manuscript and improved its English style.

Pierre Bonnechere read the complete draft and offered precious suggestions, clarifications, and corrections. The hospitality of Marie and Pierre Bonnecehere and our conversations on underground, earthly, and heavenly affairs made my visit to Montreal an unforgettable event. I profited very much from the friendly discussions of the book or its parts on several occasions: at the Round Table at the University of Montreal, in the Ancient Societies Workshop at the University of Chicago, and at two conferences, at the University of Exeter in 2006 and at the University of Patras in 2007. I am indebted to Richard Seaford for his comments on parts of the manuscript. The manuscript has also benefited from the observations made by the anonymous readers for Oxford University Press. Any errors that persist are my responsibility.

Working on this book, I enjoyed two very productive sabbatical terms, at the Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London and at the University of Chicago. I am most grateful to both institutions and especially to their libraries, where I spent many rewarding hours. In particular, I want to thank Christopher Faraone, my host at the University of Chicago, for the warmest welcome in the windy city.

Thanks are due to the staff of Oxford University Press, and especially to Hilary O'Shea, Senior Editor in Classics, Ancient History, and Archaeology.

Finally, this book would have never been written without my husband, Isaac Gilead.

Y.U.
Beer Sheva, Israel

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations of ancient authors and works follow the *Greek-English Lexicon* edited by Liddell and Scott and *Oxford Latin Dictionary*; abbreviations of periodicals follow *l'Anneé philologique*.

Bowra	C. M. Bowra, *Pindari carmina cum fragmentis*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1947).
FGH	F. Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Leiden, 1923–58).
DK	H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th edn. (1951).
Dübner	F. Dübner, *Plutarchi fragmenta et spuria* (1882).
I. Erythr. und Klaz.	H. Engelman and R. Merkelbach, *Die Inschriften von Erythrai und Klazomenai* (Bonn, 1972–3).
ISM	*Inscriptiones Scythiae Minoris Graecae et Latinae*. Series altera (Bucharest), i, ed. D. M. Pippidi (1983); ii, ed. I. Stoian (1987).
Kannicht and Snell	R. Kannicht *et al.*, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Göttingen, 1971–2004).
Kern	O. Kern, *Orphicorum fragmenta* (Berlin, 1922).
LIMC	*Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (Zurich and Munich, 1981–).
LSCG	F. Sokolowski, *Lois sacrées des cités grecques* (Paris, 1969).
LSCG Suppl.	F. Sokolowski, *Lois sacrées des cités grecques. Supplément* (Paris, 1962).
Nauck	A. Nauck, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Hildesheim, 1964).
PMG	K. Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (Stuttgart, 1973–4).
Page	D. Page, *Poetae Melici Graeci* (Oxford, 1962).
Radt	S. Radt, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Göttingen, 1972).

Rose	V. Rose, *Aristotelis qui ferebantur librorum fragmenta* (Leipzig, 1886).
Sandbach	F. H. Sandbach, *Moralia Vol. 7* (Leipzig, 1967).
ThCRA	*Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum* (Los Angeles, 2005–).
Turyn	A. Turyn, *Pindari carmina cum fragmentis* (Oxford, 1952).
West	M. L. West, *Iambi et elegi Graeci* (Oxford, 1972).
Wehrli	F. Wehrli, *Die Schule des Aristoteles* (Basle, 1944–69).

The dates in this book are BC unless noted otherwise.

Genuinely, we know nothing: the truth is in the depth.
Democritus fr. 117 *DK*

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Introduction

1. CAVES AND THE GREEK QUEST FOR THE DIVINE TRUTH

The Greeks were ambiguous about caves, and the symbol of this ambiguity is the famous cave of the Nymphs on Ithaca: it had two entrances, one for the mortals and the other one for immortals only.[1] Caves hid awe-inspiring secrets and treasures, they served as shelters or places of seclusion, they could be exciting, mysterious, or frightening, but they were always numinous.

The most famous image of the cave in the ancient literature is drawn by Plato in the seventh book of the *Republic*.[2] A dark cavern, inhabited by fettered prisoners, is his simile of the world of the unenlightened and uneducated, forced to live in the darkness of ignorance. They believe that the shadows of the real objects are the truth; if released from their confinement, they will be blinded by the sunlight, but later will be able to comprehend the visible world. When they return to the cave, driven by compassion for their former friends, their knowledge will be ridiculed by those who have not seen the actual world. The entire human world is viewed as this dark cave, inhabited by people who cannot or do not want to see the reality, and when forced to do so, will try to escape. The appearance of the visible world shown to the prisoners is ultimately the reality, that is, the supreme truth; the prisoner's ascent from the darkness of the cave

[1] *Od.* 13. 103–13; Porphyr. *De antro* 1–4.
[2] 514A–521B.

into the light is the ascent of the soul into the realm of reason and good.[3]

Plato takes the notion of the world as a cave a step further: in the *Republic* the cave is the world of appearances and commonly held opinions, the only one known to the ignorant, whereas the enlightened know the realm beyond it. In the *Phaedo*, Plato ascribes to Socrates the view of the inhabited world as a huge hollow, which is in fact only the corroded part of the enormous and beautiful real world.[4] Thus, the cave is either a small space where the souls of the ignorant are incarcerated, or a huge place where feeble-minded men live, but in both cases the cave is the place of confinement for the unenlightened, imprisoned in their ignorance and unaware of the supreme reality.[5]

Contrary to Plato's image of the cave as a place of ignorance, my study focuses on the gifts of the caves. First, it is about actual physical descent into the darkness of a cave as a way to enlightenment and the sojourn in a cave as a means of acquiring ultimate, superhuman knowledge. Further, it is about passage through a cave or a tunnel as a mental image of the route to divine truth. And finally, it is about mystical visions of the cosmos as a cave.

In Greek and Roman paganism, caves were omnipresent: during his great persecution of the pagans, Constantine sent his emissaries into 'every pagan temple's recess and every gloomy cave'.[6] I do not intend to discuss all the activities which the Greeks connected with caves. In mythology, caves were dwelling places for various creatures unwelcome in the civilized world, such as assorted monsters like the Cyclops and exiles like Philoctetes.[7] I do not suggest that all the cults practised in

[3] Procl. *In Rem publ.* 12. 287–96; Frutiger 1930: 101–5; Malcolm 1962; Adam 1963: 2, 88, 95, 156–63; Morrison 1977: 227–31; Annas 1981: 252–8; Morgan 1990: 135–8.

[4] Plato, *Phaedo* 109A–110A; Kingsley 1995: 105–6, 126.

[5] Yet Plato's ideas on descent, catabasis, are more complicated. Catabasis is the way to anabasis, ascent: in effect, the route downwards leads upwards, to knowledge. D. Clay subtly demonstrates that the *Republic* starts with Socrates' descent to Piraeus, continues with observation, *theôria*, of the events there, and finishes with his ascent to Athens: a philosophical analogue to Odysseus' catabasis into the netherworld, in order to discover the knowledge hidden from the mortals. The 'architectonic connection' between Socrates' journey and the catabasis and anabasis into and out of the cave shows that, even for Plato, the route to higher wisdom and enlightenment had to pass through lower realms of darkness (Clay 1992: 125–9; Murray 1999: 260).

[6] Euseb. *Vita Const.* 3. 57. 4, cited by Lane Fox 1987: 673 and by Stroumsa 1996: 175.

[7] Roux 1999: 259–83.

caves were aimed at attaining divine revelation. Cultic caves at the Isthmian sanctuary of Poseidon included kitchens and were used as underground dining rooms.[8] Caves played a considerable role in cults concerned with fertility: for instance, in the cult of Demeter piglets were deposited in underground chasms or *megara* and later collected.[9] As early as in the *Odyssey*, Eileithyia the goddess of birth is an owner of a cave.[10] Heroic and divine unions, such as those of Peleus and Thetis, of Jason and Medea, of Aeneas and Dido, are often consummated in caves.[11] Rhea or Mother of the Gods gave birth to Zeus and later hid him in a cave on Mt Ida or Mt Dicte on Crete.[12] Physical contact with the earth inside the caves, and the feeling of being within its entrails in the most tangible sense, were important.[13] True, the metaphor of the cave as the womb of the earth and the connection of caves with fertility and chthonic cults are common.[14] However, they are much less universal than thought formerly, and the notion of a primeval fertility goddess from whom all comes and to whom all return,[15] as well as the

[8] Gebhard 2002.

[9] Dietrich 1973: 5–8; Clinton 1993: 113–14; below, Chapter 5.2.

[10] 19. 188. A Minoan cult of a goddess named Eleuthia in a cave at Amnisos, featuring several rock formations modified by the hands of numerous worshipers, is testified by a tablet from Cnossos and abundant gifts, Faure 1964: 82–90; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 262; Willetts 1962: 52, 169; Dietrich 1974: 88; Burkert 1985: 26–7.

[11] Verg. *Aen.* 4. 165–6; Knight 1967: 272; Roux 1999: 333–5.

[12] Robertson 1996: 247–51; Faure 1964: 8, 83–94; Dietrich 1974: 88, 109; cf. below, Chapter 5.2. Many Cretan caves were frequented from prehistoric to Roman times, and especially during the Minoan age. A hundred out of 3,400 known Cretan caves were used in cult (Kusch and Kusch 2001: 123). However, in most cases the nature of cult, as well as its continuity, are uncertain (Faure 1964; Dietrich 1974: 81–96, 108–27; Burkert 1985: 24–6; Rutkowski and Nowicki 1996).

[13] It may be significant that in Dodona, regarded by the Greeks as the most ancient oracle (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275b; Rachet 1962), the replies of the oak-tree sacred to Zeus were interpreted by the Selloi, 'men of unwashed feet, sleeping on the ground' (Hom. *Il.* 16. 234; Gartziou-Tatti 1990: 180). These two obligations are perhaps symbolic of the connection of mediators of the divine will to the earth (Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: 2, 295; Parke 1967*b*: 9, 23–4; Morrison 1981: 96). For a different interpretation, see Georgoudi 1998: 333–9.

[14] Delcourt 1982: 177. The belief that birth is a passage from the darkness of the womb to the daylight appears in numerous literary references and is reflected in the association of 'divine mothers', such as the Earth, with darkness, Parisinou 2000: 45.

[15] Saintyves 1918: 139–65; Picard 1922: 452–67; Knight 1967: 164, 252; Neumann 1963; Dietrich 1967: 398–401; Motte 1973: 80–5, 240–3; Motte 2004: 243; Kern 2000: 31. H. and I. Kusch associate all the cave cults of the classical world with chthonic deities (Kusch and Kusch 2001: 118–19).

Freudian inclination to see every grotto as uterine image or substitute for refuge in the maternal embrace, have been generally abandoned in recent research.[16]

I do not claim that prophecy and the quest for ultimate truth were always focused on caves. What I say is that these two activities were connected with underground chambers and grottoes in so many cases[17] that the association cannot be coincidental. Since the dead were believed to know more than the living about earthy affairs, it would seem only natural for their consultation to be carried out close to their abode, in a cave or subterranean chamber, and thus, for Gaia's oracles to be located in grottoes, inside the earth. The fact that Trophonius' abode was underground may explain the descent of those who consulted his oracle. It is more complicated, however, to find a reason for placing Apollo and his mediums in a cave. For the Greeks, no other Olympian could be further from the subterranean world: as Plutarch puts it, 'Night has nothing in common with Apollo.'[18] The constant connection of the shining god's oracles with caves calls for an explanation which cannot be based on the assumption of the deity's chthonic nature.

These phenomena have been generally ignored or underestimated.[19] The oracular quality of caves was marked occasionally, but was explained as either stemming from 'their primary significance as the site of burial and periodic rebirth',[20] or signifying the negative 'kind of *Unheilsprophetik* which represented the dark powers of nature',[21] or places of contact between this world and the netherworld.[22] My aim is to consider the impact of the environment provided by caves and artificial grottoes on the minds of people who entered them.

[16] Freudian interpretations: Meslin 1973: 210; Leroi-Gourhan 1984; Roux 1999: 323–42.

For a critical assessment of the mother-goddess idea in the Mediterranean context, see Talalay 1994.

[17] See Ch. 2.

[18] Plut. *Mor.* 566C; cf. Farnell 1907: 4, 253.

[19] Very few works are dedicated to the subject: Saintyves 1918; Faure 1964. In a book on Roman grottoes H. Lavagne states that in Greece caves belonged to marginal or minor deities (Lavagne 1988: 699–700).

[20] Dietrich 1978: 5.

[21] Ibid. 4.

[22] Rosenberger 2001: 129–33; Kingsley 1995: 282; Curnow 2004: 8.

I have focused on individuals who sought superhuman wisdom, and more specifically, on the conditions they required or were considered to require in order to obtain divine revelation. Contents of oracular utterings concern me only so far as they throw light on the methods used by vatic persons to achieve divine inspiration. History and politics behind oracular cults and archaeology of shrines are given attention only if they provide evidence on the process of divination.

'Impresarios of gods',[23] 'mediators of the divine',[24] 'masters of truth'[25]—who were they, people who believed that their inspiration came from the gods? Francis Cornford, in his *Principium Sapientiae*, was the first to trace the common derivation of the poet, the seer, and the sage from the undifferentiated shaman-like practitioner of the past. He called attention to the traces of common origin still discernible in the activities of Greek poets, prophets, and philosophers of the Archaic and Classical ages, especially their conscious attribution of knowledge to divine inspiration, in particular by Apollo, the divine shaman-figure.[26] The Greeks perceived mental experiences of exceptional intensity as stemming from divine intervention: poets were inspired by the Muses, the visions of prophets were imparted by gods, sages received revelatory dreams, and the intense emotional experiences of simple mortals were also believed to be due to divine intervention. Unusual psychological phenomena were explained as possession by the gods or *enthousiasmos*.[27] Democritus, the inventor of the atomic theory of matter, also recognized the kinship of the seer's intuitions, poetic genius, mystic insights, and mental afflictions, but ascribed these phenomena to an abnormal physical condition, namely to extremely rapid motion of psychic atoms.[28]

[23] La Barre 1980: 50. [24] Berchman 1998.

[25] Detienne 1996.

[26] Cornford 1952: 88–106. The first to suggest shamanistic aspects in the activities of the Greek sages and philosophers, such as Empedocles and Parmenides, was H. Diels (1897). See Chadwick 1942; Vernant 1974: 12–13; Murray 1981 on poetic inspiration and enthusiasm and esp. p. 88 on the spectrum of experience of inspiration. For a different view on the nature of the distinction between poetry and prophesy see Tigerstedt 1970; Nagy 1990. For the connection between singing, prophecy, and ecstasy: in the Germanic world, Davidson 1981: 129–30; in the pre-Islamic Arabic tradition, Zwettler 1990: 76–80.

[27] Delatte 1934: 5; Motte 2004: 247–52; cf. Maurizio 1995: 76–7.

[28] Delatte 1934; Cornford 1952: 64–6.

At the same time, distrust of the mundane human wisdom is inherent in Greek thought.[29] The early Greeks believed that only the gods could really know the truth.[30] Yet notwithstanding the commonsensical conviction that 'the mind of the immortals is all concealed from man', as Solon puts it,[31] there always were mortals who tried to rid themselves of human imperfection and communicate with the divine wisdom. Plutarch mentions sages (*sophoi*) of Solon's age, who 'acquired their knowledge of the divine by means of ecstatic wisdom'.[32]

In the *Phaedo*,[33] Socrates argues that the sustenance of the body and its desires hinders the pursuit of the truth and that, even when people turn to philosophy,

> the body is constantly breaking in upon our studies and disturbing us with noise and confusion, so that it prevents our beholding the truth, and in fact we perceive that, if we are ever to know anything absolutely, we must be free from the body and must behold the actual activities with the eye of the soul alone. And then, as our argument shows, when we are dead we are likely to possess the wisdom which we desire and claim to be enamoured of, but not while we live. For, if pure knowledge is impossible while the body is with us, one of two things must follow, either it cannot be acquired at all or only when we are dead; for then the soul will be by itself apart from the body, but not before. And while we live, we shall, I think, be nearest to knowledge when we avoid, so far as possible, intercourse and communion with the body... (Translation by H. N. Fowler)

The idea that the dead were endowed with superhuman knowledge appeared as early as in Homeric times,[34] and accounts for the thriving

[29] See for instance Xenophanes (*DK* B34) and Hercalitus (*DK* B78, 79) who deny enduring knowledge to mortals. Diog. Laert. 9. 72–3 collected quotations on the subject.

[30] Snell 1960: 136; Starr 1968: 349, 351. The idea that human mind is evicted by the divine, and that a gap divides the unexcited state and the divine *mania*, remained ingrained in Greek philosophy till its eclipse: e.g. Philo, *Her.* 263–5, cf. Nasrallah 2003: 41; Iambl. *De myst.* 3. 11–12, cf. Shaw 1995: 232–6.

[31] Fr. 17 West.

[32] Referring to Epimenides, *Solon* 12: *sophos peri ta theia tên enthousiastikên sophian.* On Epimenides see below, Ch. 4.1.

[33] 66 DE; Ogden 2001: 244; Morgan 1990: 55–79.

[34] Song 11 of the *Odyssey.*

of necromancy throughout antiquity.[35] It was considered so self-evident that in the second century AD Lucian in his *Menippus* joked about a man who was so disappointed by run-of-the-mill philosophy that he descended into Hades to find out the right way to live.

For Socrates, in order to reach the ultimate truth, the mind of a mortal must cease to be merely human, and mingle with the divine. To attain superhuman wisdom, the soul must be liberated from its connection with the body. He says in the *Phaedo* that in order to transcend the limits of incarnate knowledge the philosopher must terminate his worldly existence, and only then is he able to reach the real divine postcarnate knowledge.[36]

The Greeks knew several ways to liberate their souls from the constraints of the body and still remain alive. Some mystics claimed that they could release their souls at will; independent of the body, the soul could achieve superhuman knowledge. Others attained states of intense concentration by means of meditation-like techniques. Ordinary people on the verge of death reported out-of-body experiences, involving the feeling of their soul's flight. Possession by a deity, divinely inspired madness, enabled temporary abandonment of the human self and transformed an individual into a medium, uttering words coming from the deity, rather than from the mortal mind. All these techniques were known to Plato.[37] Moreover, on several occasions Plato associates philosophical doctrines with ecstatic revelation, thus suggesting that human enquiry derives from a superhuman source.[38]

Ecstatic practices were frequently associated with caves and dark spaces. The association was either physical, meaning that a certain activity was carried out in a cavern or other secluded space, or mental, implying that a certain activity recurrently produced visions of caves and tunnels. In what follows I shall focus on the use of caves and underground chambers by inspired mediums, 'impresarios of gods'—prophets, poets and sages,—in their search for the divine truth.

[35] Ogden 2001, esp. 230–50.

[36] Cornford 1952: 58; Carlier 1974: 251; Morgan 1990: 55–79; cf. Detienne 1963: 78.

[37] e.g. *Tim.* 71E–72B.

[38] Morgan 1990: 22–4, 64, 195.

2. INSPIRED PROPHECY

In the ancient world, there were two ways to ascertain the will of the gods: either directly, by means of pronouncements by a person believed to serve as a transmitter of the divine truth or will, or indirectly, by interpretation of signs or omens.[39] The transmission was a natural or divine gift, hence *mantikê atechnos* for the Greeks and *divinatio naturalis* for the Romans, whereas the interpretation could be learnt as an art, therefore respectively *mantikê entechnos* and *divinatio artificiosa*.[40] Terms used by modern students of divination differ: direct, intuitive, or inspired on the one hand, indirect, inductive, or deductive on the other.[41]

Inspired prophecy and divine revelation are comparatively rare, and could be achieved only by chosen individuals, usually in special circumstances. Thus, direct communication with the gods through mediums, among them ecstatics, or through visions and dream-visions, are known in the Near East, among the Mari, Hittites, Babylonians, and Assyrians, but they seem to have played a minor role in these civilizations.[42] The usual method of learning the gods' will was by deciphering the language of signs, most commonly extispicy or haruspicy, divination by inspection of the entrails of sacrificial animals.[43] In pharaonic Egypt, direct prophecy did not exist: deities announced their will by movements, to be interpreted and recorded by the priests.[44] In ancient Israel, in contrast to other

[39] The most comprehensive account of divination still remains Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82. W. R. Holliday (1913) introduced an anthropological approach into the study of divination. Since then, studies of major oracles and related phenomena have greatly increased our knowledge, but there are still few synthetic studies of Greek oracles (e.g. Vernant 1974; Burkert 2005). Recent years witness renewed interest in the subject, as the books by V. Rosenberger (2001, 1998) and several collections of articles (Heintz 1997; Ciraolo and Seidel 2002; Johnston and Struck 2005) demonstrate.

[40] Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: i. 62; Belayche and Rüpke 2005: 80.

[41] Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: i. 107–10; Dodds 1973: 70; Gurney 1981: 142; Karp 1998: 13; Bevan 1928; Dietrich 1990; Maurizio 1995; Burkert 2005: 2; Belayche and Rüpke 2005: 80.

[42] Nissinen 2000, esp. van der Toorn 2000: 79; Huffmon 2000; Bottéro 1974: 89–93; Haldar 1945: 21–9; Durand 1997.

[43] Gurney 1981; Bottéro 1974: *passim*, esp. 190.

[44] Assmann 2001: 154.

Near Eastern cultures, inspired prophecy played a more prominent role.[45] In Italy, imported oracles, mostly of Greek origin, were based on divine inspiration, while the normal indigenous mode of divination was by lots.[46] Examples of divinatory trance are known in modern Africa and Asia, in Cameroon (Mofu) and in Tibet.[47] It is understandable why soothsaying by indirect methods was preferred: it is more available, can be controlled or manipulated without much difficulty, and does not require the extraordinary states of consciousness indispensable for the activities of seers and prophets.

To attain true knowledge is the greatest challenge, and the way to this knowledge is perilous and excruciating. Descriptions of divination séances as painful ordeals are found in literatures of many peoples. To the Greek and Roman accounts of the exhaustion of the Pythia in Delphi, the frenzy of the Sibyl, and health risks faced by the prophets at Claros,[48] can be added examples from beyond the Mediterranean world. In a Norse saga, a wise woman, when posed two questions by the same person, says: 'I will not undergo this great strain again, for it has been of no small cost to me, and neither threads nor fair words will be of any avail.'[49] Nowadays, at the Nechung oracle in Tibet, the prophetic trance consumes all the energies of the medium known as the Kuden.[50]

In Greece, prophecy inspired directly by a divinity was considered to be more ancient than the decipherment of signs and superior to it.[51] To gain inspiration, a mortal had to become possessed by a god (*katochos* or *theolêptos*), or to 'to have the god inside him- or herself' (*entheos*): the seer (*mantis*) or prophet (*prophêtês*) served as mediums, conveying superhuman knowledge by means of their bodies.[52] In the grip of the god, the medium could display a wide range of abnormal

[45] Huffmon 2000: 66; Haldar 1945: 108–26; Grottanelli 1998. Such figures as Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha, combining the characteristics of sages, sorcerers, and seers, are classified as belonging to the 'shamanistic type'. Their revelatory trance was induced by various methods, such as rhythmical music, dancing, self-flagellation, and even use of hallucinogens (Aune 1983: 83, 86–7).

[46] Champeaux 1990*a*: 271.

[47] Rouget 1990: 84.

[48] Discussed below, Chs. 3.4–5, and 4.1.

[49] *Ljosvetninga Saga,* 11, cited after Davidson 1981: 125.

[50] Arnott 1989.

[51] Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: i. 49–55.

[52] On cult officials in oracular shrines, see Georgoudi 1998.

behaviour, from mere detachment and aloofness to violent paroxysms. These mental states, which today would be referred to as 'altered states of consciousness', were *enthousiasmos* (divine possession) or *mania* (madness, frenzy) for the Greeks. In the famous passage in the *Phaedrus,* Socrates says that the greatest blessings come to mortals through madness, when it is a gift of the gods. He connects prophetic art (*mantikê*) with *mania* both etymologically and in essence,[53] and continues:

> The ancients then testify that in proportion as prophecy is superior to augury, both in name and in fact, in the same proportion madness, which comes from god, is superior to sanity, which is of human origin. (Translation by H. N. Fowler)

The most intriguing question is how inspired divination was attained. By what techniques could an individual, whether a 'freelance' seer or a prophetic priest in an institutionalized shrine, induce in himself or herself the state of enthusiasm? The importance of an appropriate environment is immediately evident, and the striking proportion of cases in which inspired prophecy was practised in caves or was connected to vaults and close spaces may provide a clue.

3. METHODOLOGY

The analysis of human thought cannot be based exclusively on a research into the culture which gave rise to it. Existing testimony on Greek religion and culture contains very limited direct evidence—several allusions and one or two late descriptions—on mental experiences undergone by prophets and sages. Moreover, while there are numerous factual accounts, linking prophetic and mystical activities to caverns and closed spaces, they provide very few details of

[53] 244AB. The etymological connection is clear to modern scholars, as well: Frisk 1973–9, s.v. *mainomai;* Chantraine 1983–4: s.v. *mainomai.* Both words derive from the Indo-European root **men* meaning 'to be in a special, or differentiated, state of consciousness' (West 2007: 29). Mari texts (Syria, 18th cent. BC) provide an interesting parallel: inspired prophets are called there *muhhûm,* which means 'completely mad' (Durand 1997: 123, 128). For a different opinion see Casevitz 1992.

the personal sensations of those involved. These accounts cannot be explained solely inside their cultural context. What is called for in order to fill in the gaps in the knowledge of men of the past is application of facts and explanatory models based on the study of men of the present, provided by anthropology and neuroscience.

Cable-like methods of argumentation, which intertwine several stands of reasoning, as opposed to chain-like arguments that proceed link-by-link, have been applied to the study of ancient culture for some time. Whereas in the 'chain method', one absent or faulty link can invalidate the entire chain, the 'cabling' method permits compensation for gaps in extant records and the discarding of imprudent hypotheses, by enabling the researcher to seek explanation of a certain phenomenon in a different field and employ congruous data in an explanatory model. An example of the successful use of the 'cabling' method is the extensive acceptance of the anthropological perspective in the study of the Greek society.[54] However, the methodological foundation of this approach has only recently been expounded by D. Lewis-Williams.[55]

Using several classes of evidence requires caution: data are to be taken at face value, without subjective elaboration and without reading into them details that fit the suggested conception. Different classes of evidence (literary, archaeological, neuropsychological, anthropological, etc.) should be investigated separately, and comparisons are to be made only at a later stage of each line of independent research.[56]

In accordance with this principle, the book starts (Chapter 1) with an overview of the current issues in neuropsychological and anthropological research that are of crucial importance for the examination of the experiences of Greek sages, seers, and religious practitioners inside caves and closed chambers. Not being a professional neuroscientist or psychologist, I have made every effort to avoid statements on controversial issues and to remain within the limits of consensus among the experts.

[54] Jeanmaire 1939; Gernet 1981; Vidal-Naquet 1986; several works dealing specifically with oracles, e.g. Whittaker 1965; Crapanzano and Garrison 1977.

[55] Lewis-Williams 2002: 102–4.

[56] Cf. the 'neutral methodology which excludes prior assumptions' assumed by Sourvinou-Inwood 1987: 217.

The sections that follow are devoted to Greek institutionalized oracles which operated in caves, independent seers, sages, and philosophers, and mystery cults. The evidence is discussed in three stages: first, examination of literary and archaeological data concerning cultic or intellectual activities in caves; second, evaluation of their historical significance. Finally, the evidence is juxtaposed with the results of non-historical research, expounded in Chapter 1.

With the exception of Chapter 1, the book is based on evidence traditionally used in the study of history of Greek culture—written texts and archaeological data. In several cases the evidence is compared with the results of recent geological investigations. As in Chapter 1, I have used geological data only when convinced that, however recent, the research in question is widely accepted.

The written testimonies cited in this book are extremely heterogeneous, dating from different periods and belonging to several genres, such as history, philosophy, epic and lyrical poetry, drama, geography, and lexicography. In-depth analysis of historical, cultural, or textological background of each and every piece of evidence was unfeasible, and even brief references to the context of a quotation are provided only when indispensable. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same applies to the treatment of epigraphical testimonies. Likewise, as regards archaeological evidence, the characteristics of the site and the history of its research are always taken into account, although indicated only when necessary for the discussion.

As a rule, ancient written tradition is considered reliable, especially if many well-informed authors have recorded the same or similar facts over centuries; *onus probandi* of the alleged untruthfulness of a testimony rests with the researcher who questions it.[57] Consequently, whenever I suggest a reassessment of an established view the discussion is unavoidably more detailed, since it involves examination both of the ancient tradition and of the modern research. Where the matching of written and archaeological sources presents difficulty, it does not entail rejecting the entire ancient tradition *en masse*, but rather calls for careful analysis and evaluation of the evidence. If such an analysis does not provide clear results, a frank admission of ignorance is better than tinkering with the data.

[57] Cf. Roux 1976: 94.

1

Cave Experiences and the Human Mind

Neuropsychological[1] approach to religious phenomena tends to evoke suspicion, because it is still novel. A historian of Greece and Rome might claim that *res novae* for the Romans and *ta kaina* for the Greeks always had an air of doubt about them, whereas modern Western culture is open to new ideas. However, we also treat new methods with much mistrust. The immortal Sir Humphrey Appleby in J. Lynn's and A. Jay's *Yes, Minister*, who uses 'original' and 'imaginative' as most damning criticisms and 'novel' as a killer, brilliantly personifies a modern conservative approach to new ideas.

'The standard assumption in the social sciences and humanities has been that only social and cultural methods can explain social and cultural facts.'[2] The reason for this assumption is easy to understand: subjects of enquiry, theories and methods of the humanities and the social sciences, on the one hand, and of biology and neuroscience, on the other hand, are so disparate that very few anthropologists or

[1] I use the term 'neuropsychology' in a broad sense, meaning a combination of neuroscientific and psychological research. This chapter is based on my contention that human mind is the functioning of the human brain: 'Mind is how brain experiences its own functioning, and brain provides the structure of the mind' (Laughlin *et al.* 1992: 13), notwithstanding the importance of social interaction and cultural conditions in the emergence of personality. This view ensues from the so-called materialistic approach to the relation between body and mind, or psychophysical monism: Bunge 1980; Edelman 1992; cf. Smart 1963; Armstrong 1993. During the recent decades Cartesian mind–body dualism has been largely abandoned in the cognitive sciences and neurosciences (Bindra 1980; Gallagher 2005: esp. pp. 134–6; see also Gärdenfors 2006; Corballis and Lea 1999), although the debate on the mind–body problem still continues, mainly in the philosophy of mind: Popper and Eccles 1977; Moravia 1995; Warner and Szubka 1994; McGinn 1991.

[2] Lawson 2000: 338; cf. Burkert 2001: ii. 8–108; Lewis 1989: 160.

historians can venture to undertake a research from the perspective of neuroscience or psychology. However, during the last two decades, the need for such research has been felt so acutely that some paradigm shift started to emerge. Notwithstanding legitimate doubts and less reasonable a priori antagonism, explanatory theories of cultural phenomena provided by neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and computer science are being recognized by a steadily growing number of scholars. Groundbreaking studies by a number of psychiatrists and psychologists have given rise to a cognitive science of religion, which is making impressive progress.[3] At present quite a number of neuroscientists are focusing their attention on the role of brain functions in the generation of experiences belonging to the sphere of religion.[4] The 'conceptual integration' between the natural, social, and historical sciences has created a new field of study called neurotheology,[5] or neurophenomenology of religion, which now encompasses a vast spectrum of topics applying new developments in neuroscience to the study of myth, ritual, and religious experience.[6] The progress in both theory and techniques of neuroscience holds out the promise of a dazzling future to this research, but it also calls for the prompt upgrading and perfection of the proposed models,[7] which are being amended at a quicker pace than can be coped with by many historians and anthropologists.

Nevertheless, researchers trained in social sciences and humanities, such as D. Lewis-Williams, M. Winkelman, and H. Whitehouse, have started to bridge the gap between scientific and religious or cultural

[3] Prince 1968; D'Aquili *et al.* 1979; Laughlin *et al.* 1992; D'Aquili and Newberg 1998, 1999; Newberg *et al.* 2001 (cf. Spezio 2001); Wulff 1997; Newberg 2001; Lawson and McCauley 1990; Lawson 2000; Spilka and McIntosh 1997; Barrett 2000; Andresen 2001*a, b*; Pyysiäinen and Anttonen 2002; McCauley and Lawson 2002; Sørensen 2005.

[4] Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998: 174–98; Barrett 2000; Austin 1998; Joseph 2000; Whitehouse and McMauly 2006.

[5] D'Aquili and Newberg (1999: 4) believe that the term neurotheology was coined by James Ashbrook in 1984. In fact, as Horgan 2003: 74 notes, it was introduced by Aldous Huxley in his novel *Island* in 1962.

[6] Andresen 2001: 258; Newberg 2001: 502; Joseph 2003*a*. This approach is fundamentally different from psycho-history, based on application of principles of psychoanalysis to historical phenomena, and expounded for instance by Bastide 1949; Meslin 1973. To the crucial inconsistencies of Freudian and Jungian-style psychoanalysis, psycho-history adds the ambiguity of postulating fixed types of social responses to traumatic situations in varying social conditions.

[7] Newberg 2001: 505.

perspectives.[8] The pioneer in the field of classical studies is W. Burkert, whose recent book *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* not only deals with the psychology of religious phenomena, but endeavours 'to tie historical and philological research to biological anthropology'.[9] A cautious attempt to apply models of neurotheology to his investigation of the Roman cult of Mithras has been recently made by R. Beck.[10]

These studies are welcomed by some and remain anathema to others. Historians of religion focus on social, political, literary, and theological aspects of religions. However, religious phenomena have not only an 'outside', that is, religious behaviour as attested by various sources, but also an 'inside', the consciousness of people who were engaged in a particular type of behaviour. The mental make-up of major actors in the sphere of religion, prophets, clairvoyants, and sages is both challenging and difficult to reconstruct, and still awaits appropriate consideration.

Consciousness is largely determined by socially transmitted culture. Yet the genetically transmitted biology of *Homo sapiens* has remained the same for the last 150,000 years: this 'hardware' largely defines electro-chemical activity of the brain and the results of its activity that we call consciousness. We are bound to assume that, since the ancient Greeks belonged to the species *Homo sapiens*, basic functions recognized by modern neuroscience existed in the brain of the ancient Greeks as well. The results of the modern research in neuroscience and psychology are therefore applicable to the study of Greek religion, in conjunction with the traditional historical approach.

1. ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Waking consciousness, considered the only one normal by most modern Westerners, is merely one state of consciousness inside a much broader spectrum. Characteristically, states different from the

[8] Lewis-Williams 2002; Winkelman 2000; Whitehouse 2000, 2004; Pearson 2002.
[9] Burkert 2001: p. xi.
[10] Beck 2006: 88–98, 136–52.

waking consciousness are dubbed 'altered states of consciousness'. These can be attained by different methods, and involve different experiences, but they share a most important common characteristic: they silence the waking consciousness and free the mind from the limitations of the alert ego, allowing self-transcendence and awareness undisturbed by the external world.[11] Although some types of altered states, such as delusions characteristic of schizophrenia, are symptomatic of pathological conditions, in many cases altered states of consciousness are experienced by mentally healthy individuals.

Altered states of consciousness are sometimes called mystic phenomena; although a number of authors employ these terms interchangeably, it is useful to classify mystical experiences as a sub-category inside the broader category of altered states of consciousness: every mystical experience involves altered states of consciousness, but not every hallucination, which is an altered state of consciousness, is necessarily a mystical experience.[12] As to the notions of ecstasy and trance, also often used synonymously with mysticism, they are only partially overlapping: ecstatic experiences of euphoria are not always mystical or trance-like.[13]

About one-third of randomly sampled Americans and Europeans report having experienced psychic and faith phenomena that can be identified as mystical;[14] 2–3 per cent of the polled population claim to have had an intensely emotional mystical experience, such as the feeling of oneness with the world.[15] A survey of approximately five hundred traditional societies around the globe, conducted by E. Bourguignon, demonstrates the presence of culturally patterned institutionalized forms of altered states of consciousness in

[11] For a comparison between different modes of consciousness see Winkelman 2000: 113–24.

[12] The classic work that introduced this term is W. James's 1902 book: James 1961. On mystical experiences see Ellwood 1980: p. xi; Streng 1978: 142–3; Austin 1998: 19–20; Bishop 1995; Paper 2004; on hallucinations in general: Siegel and West 1975. On different mystical traditions see: Zaehner 1961; Stace 1960; Bishop 1995. For an up-to-date popular overview of the subject, see Horgan 2003.

[13] Björkqvist 1982; Siikala 1982: 104; Laski 1990. G. Rouget draws a clear distinction between trance and ecstasy: Rouget 1990: 39–84; I. M. Lewis is reluctant to recognize the difference as universal (Lewis 1989). Cf. below on the possible proximity of the neurological mechanisms of these phenomena.

[14] Ellwood 1980: 1; Hood 1997: 227; Geels 1982: 48; Austin 1998: 20.

[15] Atran 2003: 165; cf. the polls cited by Horgan 2003: 82–3.

90 per cent of sampled societies.[16] This is 'a striking finding and suggests that we are dealing with a matter of major importance, . . . a psychobiological capacity available to all [traditional] societies'.[17] Moreover, up to the present day these phenomena play an important role in the religious and social life of urbanized societies, such as Brazil (Umbanda and Kardecism), Haiti (Voodoo), the United States (Spiritualism, Pentecostalism, and Glossolalia), and other countries.[18] Thus, altered states of consciousness are present in all types of societies, traditional and modern, in Africa, Siberia, India, as well as in New England. These experiences are not transcendental and can easily be demystified, when phrased in terms of human peak experiences which commonly occur across the world, rather than supernatural revelations.[19]

In the present-day urban-industrial society, the most common way to achieve altered states of consciousness is by consumption of drugs.[20] In *The Doors of Perception* Aldous Huxley describes his own experience of such condition, mescalin-induced and monitored by observers. 'In the mescalin experience the implied questions to which the eye responds are of another order. Place and distance cease to be of much interest.'[21] Mescalin brought A. Huxley 'the gift, without price, of a new insight into the very Nature of Things',[22] every insignificant detail he saw became 'a labyrinth of endlessly significant complexity'.[23]

> This participation in the manifest glory of things left no room, so to speak, for the ordinary, the necessary concerns of human existence, above all concerns involving persons . . . To this new-born Not-self, the behaviour, the appearance, the very thought of the self it had momentarily ceased to be, and of other selves, its one-time fellows, seemed not indeed distasteful . . . but enormously irrelevant.[24]

[16] Bourguignon 1968, 1973. See Lewis 1989: 9 on relationship and sometimes blending of trance and possession states; Holm 1982 on ecstatic phenomena within different cultures.

[17] Bourguignon 1968: 11.

[18] Oesterreich 1930; Prince 1968; Crapanzano and Garrison 1977; La Barre 1980: 62.

[19] Laski 1990; Geels 1982: 48.

[20] For a 'very short introduction' to recreational drugs see Iversen 2002: 73.

[21] Huxley 1962: 19.

[22] Ibid. 25.

[23] Ibid. 27.

[24] Ibid. 31; cf. Zaehner 1961: 1–29. Descriptions of mescalin experiences of several persons, including the author's: Zaehner 1961: 208–26.

Altered states of consciousness often create subjective sensations of contact with a transcendent spiritual world. This sensation is usually joined with dissociation, that is, the separation of thoughts, feelings, or experiences from the normal stream of consciousness and memory. From the psychological point of view, A. M. Ludwig defines as altered states of consciousness 'any mental state(s), induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological maneuvers or agents, which can be recognized subjectively by the individual himself (or by objective observer of the individual) as representing a sufficient deviation in subjective experience or psychological functioning from certain general norms for that individual during alert, waking consciousness'.[25]

Some altered states of consciousness involve mystical experiences. The core subjective characteristics of these experiences have been formulated by several researchers working independently. Despite the different approaches, the main features of mystical states as listed by different authors are amazingly similar.[26] Thus, R. S. Ellwood defines mystical experience as 'Experience in a religious context which is immediately or subsequently interpreted by the experiencer as encounter with ultimate divine reality in a direct nonrational way which engenders a deep sense of unity, and of living during the experience on a level of being other than the ordinary.'[27] R. Gimello puts forward the following elements of mystical experiences:

A mystical experience is a state of mind, achieved commonly through some sort of self-cultivation, of which the following are usually or often the salient, but not necessarily the only, features:

- A feeling of oneness or unity, variously defined.
- A strong confidence in the 'reality' or 'objectivity' of the experience, i.e. a conviction that it is somehow revelatory of 'the truth.'
- A sense of the final inapplicability to the experience of conventional language, i.e. a sense that the experience is ineffable.
- A cessation of normal intellectual operations (e.g. deduction, discrimination, ratiocination, speculation, etc.) or the substitution for

[25] Ludwig 1972: 11; 1968: 69.

[26] James 1961: 329; Hood 1997; Ellwood 1980: 15–17; Geels 1982: 28–9; Laski 1990: 41; Hollenback 1996: 40–1; Shanon 2002: 262–3; Austin 1998: 24–30.

[27] Ellwood 1980: p. xi.

them of some 'higher' or qualitatively different mode of intellect (e.g. intuition).

* A sense of coincidence of opposites, of various kinds (paradoxically).
* An extraordinary strong affective tone, again of various kinds (e.g. sublime joy, utter serenity, great fear, incomparable pleasure, etc.—often an unusual combination of these).[28]

Cognitive psychologists divide the normal spectrum of consciousness into several stages, their number differing from one researcher to another. C. Martindale assumes six stages between waking and sleeping: waking, problem-oriented thought; realistic fantasy; autistic fantasy; reverie; hypnagogic (falling asleep) states; dreaming.[29] As we pass from stage to stage of this spectrum, we disengage from environmental stimuli and move on to imagery, visual and aural, more and more disconnected from the external reality. Even in the waking state, our consciousness is 'fragmented': we oscillate between outward-directed and inward-directed states, completing about a hundred such cycles every day.[30]

Besides this normal trajectory, there is another one, dubbed by D. Lewis-Williams as 'intensified trajectory'.[31] It is more profoundly inward-oriented and comprises dream-like autistic states, such as visions and hallucinations. Altered states of consciousness are associated with electro-chemical processes in the human brain.[32] These states are achieved by various means, such as extensive motor behaviour, auditory driving, sensory deprivation and stimulation, activation of endogenous euphoriant releases, ingestion of psychotropic substances, meditation, and hypnotic suggestion.[33] Hallucinations may also result from certain pathological states, such as schizophrenia and temporal lobe epilepsy. Self-inflicted mortification, such as fatigue, fasting, and pain can also shift the consciousness along the intensified trajectory.[34] Fasting, which

[28] Gimello 1978: 178, cited by D'Aquili and Newberg 1998: 193–4; cf. Wulff 1997: 188.

[29] Martindale 1981: 311–14; cf. Wulff 1997: 109.

[30] Laughlin *et al.* 1992: 132–8.

[31] Lewis-Williams 2002: 124.

[32] For an analysis of neurological changes involved in shamanic altered states of consciousness, see Winkelman 2000; cf. Krippner and Combs 2002.

[33] Lex 1979: 122–30; Ludwig 1968; Martindale 1981: 316–20; Hood 1997: 228; Wulff 1997: 188–99; Winkelman 2000: 148–52; 2002: 1878; 2004: 198; Pearson 2002: 74.

[34] Lewis 1989: 34.

leads to hypoglycemia, and dehydration are commonly used by ascetics in combination with other methods as aids in inducing mystical states.[35] Most important for our purposes is the mechanism of trance-inducing sensory deprivation, discussed in detail below.

In many cases, individuals who have experienced profound alterations of consciousness, including psychedelic experiences, transcendental and mystical states, as well as some religious rites, claim to feel a sense of renewed hope, rejuvenation, or rebirth.[36] This aspect of altered states of consciousness is especially meaningful for the assessment of the impact of transition rites and participation in mystery initiations on the lives of those who lived through them.

Altered states of consciousness vary in their intensity, from conditions in which the experiencer remains aware of his environment to deep unconscious states. For instance, Saami shamans of Scandinavia can attain visions and soul journeys, and establish direct contact with spirits in different conditions. Spirits even visit them in regular dreams. When in 'light trance', these shamans are able to maintain contact with their surroundings, but they also see spirits who help them to cure the sick and to divine. In 'deep trance' they lie motionless like dead bodies, releasing their souls for spiritual travel.[37]

It is possible to cultivate altered states of consciousness and their intensity can be controlled. It may vary for the individual from occasion to occasion, and can develop or decrease with time. *Life of a Servant* by a fourteenth-century Christian mystic Henry Suso presents an evolving of what the mystic calls 'divine consolations', from hearing internal music coming within himself to a vision of the eternal wisdom sitting in the crystal-clear heart of the experiencer.[38] The ability to attain trance varies among individuals. (This fact was not unknown to the Greeks. Plato notes: 'Many bear the Bacchic rod, but few are Bacchants.'[39]) A person who experiences altered states of consciousness more frequently, in a culturally patterned institutionalized framework, will have greater control over the process.[40] He may

[35] Ludwig 1968: 74; Wulff 1997: 70–5.
[36] Ludwig 1968: 81–2; Persinger 1987: 38–9.
[37] Siikala 1982; Lewis-Williams 2002: 134; Harner 1990: 48–9; Austin 1998: 21.
[38] McGinn 2005: 236–8.
[39] *Phaedo* 69D.
[40] Bourguignon 1976: 55; Ellwood 1980: 119–39; Aune 1983: 86; Winkelman 2000: 124, cf. Shanon 2002: 302–3.

even be capable of acting a part, but to a restricted degree: straightforward simulation is dangerous and will be avenged by the spirits.[41]

The broad range of altered states of consciousness should be kept in mind: in studying a religious phenomenon lacking a record of 'deep trance', one should not neglect less dramatic conditions which may be responsible for visions, divination, etc. Modern Westerners are usually aware of the gap between dreaming and objective reality, but many cultures regard dreams as reflections of actual life.[42] In any case, the difference between dreams and hallucinations is 'a matter of degree rather than kind'.[43]

As D. Lewis-Williams observes,

> The states towards the end of the intensified trajectory—visions, and hallucinations that may occur in any of the five senses—are generally called 'altered states of consciousness.' The phrase can apply equally to dreaming and 'inward' states on the normal trajectory, though some people prefer to restrict its use to hallucinations and trance states. By now it will be obvious that this commonly encountered phrase is posited on the essentially Western concept of the 'consciousness of rationality.' It implies that there is 'ordinary consciousness' that is considered genuine and good, and then perverted, or 'altered,' states. But, as we have seen, all parts of the spectrum are equally 'genuine.' The phrase 'altered states of consciousness' is useful enough, but we need to remember that it carries a lot of cultural luggage.[44]

Altered states of consciousness are ubiquitous, but the attitude of societies to them varies from admiration and worship to disgust and total rejection. These extremes may exist in the same society in regard to different forms of abnormal behaviour, some of them considered benign or even divine, whereas others are dismissed as negative and abhorred.[45] For example, in ancient Greece, certain forms of madness, considered to be inspired by supernatural forces, were actively sought. 'Our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness, provided it is given us by divine

[41] Bourguignon 1976: 40–1, cf. Ustinova 1992–8: 513.

[42] For instance, see van Lieshout 1980 on the Greek attitude to dreams.

[43] Lewis-Williams 2002: 124; Hartmann 1975; Hollenback 1996: 180–2; Winkelman 2002: 1879.

[44] Lewis-Williams 2002: 125. See Winkelman 2000: 3 for the European tradition of depreciating altered states of consciousness, and emphasizing rational thought.

[45] Ustinova 1992–8, with refs.

gift', says Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*.[46] Plato further explains that the divine madness is produced by 'a divinely wrought change in our customary social norms'.[47] In contrast, other kinds of madness were expunged, either by purifications or other religious means, or by more rational methods.[48] Medieval Europe condemned demonic possession, but revered divine revelations.[49] Yet many who were canonized in the Middle Ages would be in psychiatric hospitals in our day.[50]

Within many societies altered states of consciousness are actively sought. The reasons for manipulating one's consciousness may vary from individual to individual and from culture to culture. The psychologist B. Shanon investigates motives for prolonged, sometimes lifelong engagement with an Amazonian psychotropic brew Ayahuasca. He puts forward the following: the intrinsic joy and aesthetical pleasure of the experience; quest of knowledge, well-being, and personal transformation; the attainment of transcendence; a social dimension.[51] In the indigenous context, the prominent reasons for continuous consumption of Ayahuasca are 'the gaining of knowledge, the foretelling of the future, the acquisition of the power to heal, and the transcendence of the ordinary human state of being'.[52]

Some elements of hallucinatory experiences are 'hardwired' and defined by biological functions of the human brain, whereas other major elements derive from the individual's past experience and are culturally structured.[53] It is against this experience that the meaning of the hallucinated object is assessed.[54] Constantine's vision of the Holy Cross could not have occurred before the emergence of Christianity. Revelations experienced by a medieval Jewish mystic differ from the initiatory dreams of a Siberian shaman.[55]

[46] 244A, Dodds 1973: 64. [47] *Phaedr.* 265A. [48] Ustinova 1992–8.
[49] Ginzburg 1991; McGinn 2005. [50] Merkur 1993: 3.
[51] Shanon 2002: 324–6. [52] Ibid. 323.
[53] The contrast between biological and cultural factors is not absolute: biological mechanisms may be adapted, for instance, by learning, and some cultural structures may be very rigid.
[54] West 1997: 501; Shanon 2002: 252–4.
[55] Lewis-Williams 2002: 126; cf. Ludwig 1968: 76; Sarbin and Juhasz 1975; Hollenback 1996: 75–93; Shanon 2002: 319–20.

Psychological factors and expectations also determine the nature of hallucinated objects. A shared expectation may generate a vision common to a group. Thus, several people surviving together after a shipwreck and sharing the same expectancies (mental set) may 'see' a non-existent ship projected against the empty sea and insist on its reality.[56] This observation is significant for the understanding of the experiencing of similar visions by several people and acceptance of these visions as divine by other members of the community.

For people to whom they occur, hallucinations are as real as their perceptions in the alert state.[57] Perhaps here lies the reason for the great persuasive power of visionaries and prophets: the phantoms created by their brain are completely real for them. Hence, in communicating their revelations to the society, they can speak in all sincerity of their apparitions as actually existing. Their own straightforward belief persuades the audience, often believers yearning for superhuman pronouncement, to accept every word as the uttering of the truth (although quite often this faith may be abused by charlatans).

Moreover, for the experiencer the truth attained in hallucinations is purer than mundane knowledge and immutable. During mystical states, people feel that they are in contact with supreme reality, and everything in the world becomes salient and deeply meaningful. These experiences are much more real for them than perceptions, feelings, or thoughts when in the alert state.[58] Anthropologists who became apprentices to shamans and entered altered states of consciousness under their direction report such compellingly 'real' experiences that they should be viewed as a 'non-ordinary reality'.[59]

Discussing the 'reality' of the revelations attained during epileptic seizures, V. S. Ramachandran emphasizes that, whatever their theological

[56] West 1997: 502.

[57] However, even wide-awake, individuals may encounter experiences which are entirely disconnected from their surroundings, but absolutely authentic for them. Patients who have lost a limb may suffer from excruciating 'phantom' pain in an amputated foot or hand, which is no less real than that in an injured attached limb. People who see weird characters within a blind spot in their field of vision perceive them as no less real than features seen in the space outside the blind spot: Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998; Austin 1998: 494.

[58] D'Aquili and Newberg 1998: 195; Ellwood 1980: 20; Shanon 2002: 264–6; Streng 1978: 146.

[59] Pearson 2002: 74.

value, they alter the patients' personalities permanently and transform them into different people even between seizures. Even for modern neuroscience and psychiatry, these patients present a challenge and an ethical problem: 'These patients enjoy the unique privilege of gazing directly into God's eyes every time they have a seizure. Who is to say whether such experiences are "genuine" (whatever that might mean) or "pathological"? Would you, the physician, really want to medicate such a patient and deny visitation rights to the Almighty?'[60] If these are questions modern scientists and doctors confront, how can we expect a believer—Siberian shaman, Greek sage, or medieval mystic—and his society to discard as false revelations attained in altered states of consciousness, only because they were not experienced in a normal waking state? Visions and apparitions were deemed divine, actively sought and cherished, and expounded as supreme truth to the community or to restricted circles of the initiated.

Temporal lobes of the brain and associated structures seem to be 'responsible' for the sensation of the infinite, unity with the universe, and other numinous experiences.[61] Canadian psychologist M. A. Persinger even stimulated parts of his own temporal lobes by means of a transcranial magnetic stimulator—and experienced the divine for the first time in his life.[62] The tantalizing question whether we have a special circuit for religious experience, 'a god module', in our brain, is outside the scope of the present study. For our purposes, it is important to note that altered states of consciousness resulting from 'zapping' in the region of temporal lobes are characteristically focused on religious revelations, which are perceived as absolutely real.

Some patients suffering from temporal lobe epilepsy report that during seizures (which in their case are focal, confined to small patches of brain in this area only), that last usually for no more than a few seconds, they would see 'the universe in a grain of sand'

[60] Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998: 179; cf. Wulff 1997: 99.

[61] Persinger 1983, 1984*a*, 1987: 13–21, 2003*b*; Wulff 1997: 100–3; cf. Austin 1998: 384. Wishing to check this assumption, M. A. Persinger checked the EEG of meditating subjects and people claiming such abnormal abilities as glossolalia, speaking in tongues. He found out that during these activities subjects displayed spikes in their temporal lobes (Persinger 1984*b*; Persinger and Fisher 1990; cf. Andresen 2001: 269–72).

[62] Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998: 175. J. Horgan claims that Persinger tried on himself the device he had invented, but did not experience religious sensation (Horgan 2003: 99).

and 'hold infinity in the palm of his hand'.[63] V. S. Ramachandran, one of the world's leading neuroscientists, observes that many among these patients 'say that their "feelings are on fire," ranging from intense ecstasy to profound despair... [They] have deeply moving spiritual experiences, including feeling of divine presence and the sense that they are in direct communication with the god. Everything around them is imbued with cosmic significance.'[64]

Personality changes brought about by temporal lobe epilepsy give rise to what some neurologists call 'temporal lobe personality'.[65] V. S. Ramachandran describes normal, waking behaviour of these patients in most instructive terms:

> Patients have heightened emotions and see cosmic significance in trivial events. It is claimed that they tend to be humorless, full of self-importance, and to maintain elaborate diaries that record quotidian events in elaborate detail—a trait called hypergraphia... Some of these patients are sticky in conversation, argumentative, pedantic and egocentric (although less so than many of my scientific colleagues), and they are obsessively preoccupied with philosophical and theoretical issues.[66]

Every student of religion will recognize this depiction as strikingly similar to descriptions of a number of visionaries and mystics, active in various epochs and cultures. The point is not that they all suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy (although some probably did).[67] Clinical observation of the patients described above demonstrates three important aspects of altered states of consciousness (in these cases, of pathological nature). First, physical duration of the trance state may be very limited. Second, notwithstanding the brevity of the rapture, the patient experiences the apprehension of the divine, oneness with God, and the infinity of the universe. Third, in many cases this short experience(s) may change his entire life and force him to share his illuminative knowledge with other people.

Altered states of consciousness induced by different techniques often feature similar characteristics. Thus, in his study of Ayahuasca,

[63] Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998: 183; cf. Persinger 1987: 18–19; Blackmore 1993: 208.

[64] Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998: 179.

[65] Ibid. 180, 185–7; cf. Winkelman 2000: 152; Newberg *et al.* 2001: 110; Andresen 2001: 268.

[66] Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998: 180.

[67] Persinger 1987: 18.

B. Shanon emphasizes that, notwithstanding the brevity of their experience, a significant number of his informants reported the importance of the spiritual lesson they learnt ('Ayahuasca showed me that God exists', 'I have encountered the Divine'), and the long-lasting impact of this lesson on their entire life.[68] Altered states of consciousness create 'an enhanced sense of reality',[69] their noetic quality manifests itself in the feelings of illumination and ultimate salience, and they change the experiencer's attitude to life. Obviously, these deductions are of utmost importance for the study of religious phenomena in general, and Greek in particular.

As we have seen, altered states of consciousness sometimes occur in patients suffering from pathological conditions, such as epilepsy. However it is important to emphasize that, in most cases, various states along the intensified trajectory are manifested in individuals who are healthy from the point of view of their own culture and modern Western psychiatry.[70] Mysticism is not a product of dysfunctional minds: modern psychological research demonstrates that people who experience mystical states enjoy higher-than-average levels of overall psychological health, measured by standard scales evaluating interpersonal relationships, anxiety, and general outlook on life.[71] Despite the similarity of some shamanic states to pathological states, which leads many authorities on shamanism and psychiatry to regard them as neurotic to psychotic to insane,[72] shamans are generally amongst the healthiest members of their communities.[73] Mental imagery cultivation is the deliberate fostering of visionary experience by healthy people, who learn to use the potential offered by their brain to manipulate their state of consciousness.[74]

[68] Shanon 2002: 260. [69] Ibid. 265.

[70] Lewis 1989: 166; Merkur 1985: 10–40.

[71] Newberg *et al.* 2001: 108. For a comparison between 'the mystical path' and schizophrenic reactions see Austin 1998: 30–4.

[72] For a critical survey of these opinions see Lewis 1989: 161–3.

[73] Winkelman 2000: 78; Lewis 1989: 163–5.

[74] Geyson 2000. Retrospective studies of modern people who report near-death experiences (discussed below) convincingly demonstrate that they are psychologically sound, and their experiences are unrelated to clinical disorders. The recurrence of structurally similar accounts of dissociation, and its epitome, out-of-body experience, is therefore to be attributed to the characteristic neurological state at the moment of approaching death or acute trauma, rather than to a persistent pathology caused by such events.

Moreover, people who report transcendent experiences usually have particular personality characteristics,[75] which could hint to the community at their propensity to visions and suggest their choice as 'mediators of the divine'.

An excellent example of such manipulation is the cross-cultural phenomenon of oneness with the world, known as absolute unitary being (the *unio mystica* of the Christian religion, the Hindu *samadhi*, the Buddhist Nirvana, or the Absolute of some philosophical schools).[76] Essentially, absolute unitary being is the supreme mystical feat. In this state, no sense of time and space exists, and absolute reality is attained. Absolute unitary being may be called the ultimate trance, but it also has its spectrum, starting at its lower end with an insight into the world of the mysterious and reaching at its extreme end the sensation of union with the God or the Absolute.[77] Unitary states may be attained by various methods.[78] These states involve wordless comprehension, hence are difficult to describe, and as a consequence, experiencers and their community often regard them as ineffable.[79] Verbalization of the mystical experience is easier in a supporting cultural environment, and becomes an excruciating endeavour if the experiencer does not have an access to a mystic tradition.[80] In any case, even an inexact verbal reconstruction of

[75] Persinger 1988; Hood 1991.

[76] James 1961: 329; Nieto 1997: 143–54; Stace 1960: 21–5; Idel and McGinn 1999, esp. Dupré 1999; Merkur 1993: 11–35.

[77] For a theory explaining this experience, see D'Aquili and Newberg 1998: 196; 1999: 112–13; cf. Lex 1979: 124–5.

[78] For instance, by sensory deprivation (Merkur 1993: 30–3) and by hallucinogenic drugs, starting with hashish (Siegel and Jarvik 1975: 81). In his study of Ayahuasca, B. Shanon demonstrates that one of its common effects is the feeling 'that reality is one and everything is interconnected' (Shanon 2002: 252). A recent investigation of the psychological function of DMT, a psychedelic chemical endogenously produced in the human brain, demonstrates that the volunteers who participated in the research underwent out-of-body experiences and a variety of mystical states, including sensations of the unifying presence of god within and outside the self. In noteworthy congruence with the worldwide lore of propitious and inauspicious conditions for mystical journeys, in some cases soul trips went terribly wrong and the subjects had traumatic visions (Strassman 2001; cf. Hirshfeld-Flores 2002).

[79] Austin 1998: 515–16. Some scholars relate the ineffability of altered states of consciousness to the difficulty to translate holistic peak experiences, which they attribute to the non-verbal right cerebral hemisphere, into verbal categories produced by the left hemisphere (Ahlberg 1982: 68–72).

[80] Geels 1982: 52.

the 'indescribable' usually develops from a long reflection on the nature of the experience and a painful struggle with words.

It is reported that individuals who have reached the extreme state of absolute unitary being have no fear of death: even modern experiencers who don't believe in afterlife gain a sense of goodness and acceptance of death as part of the absolutely benign reality.[81] Like the temporal lobe epilepsy patients, individuals, including materialistically oriented scientists, who have experienced absolute unitary being, regard it as more real than mundane baseline reality. 'There is no doubt that it, and even the memory of it, carried the sense of greater fundamental reality than that generated by their experiences of day-to-day living.'[82]

In summary, altered states of consciousness are widespread, they are associated with the electro-chemical activity of the human brain, and can be of pathological or non-pathological nature. The neuropsychological perspective makes abundantly clear that the states of self-transcendence and cosmic union with the absolute arise from manipulation of our brains which can be performed by means of several techniques. These states are characterized by several common denominators, present in individual experiencers to greater or lesser degree. These basic features of altered states of consciousness include alterations in thinking, disturbed time sense, perceptual distortion, changes of body-image, as well as changes in the feeling of control and in emotional expression.[83] The experience is often regarded as ineffable, and tremendous significance is ascribed to it as a contact with the divine and a revelation of ultimate truth or hidden reality.

2. CAVES AS MENTAL IMAGES

Altered states of consciousness that are determined biologically can be safely assumed to be characteristic of any *Homo sapiens*, from the

[81] D'Aquili and Newberg 1998: 195–7;1999: 109–10; Newberg *et al.* 2001: 124; cf. Winkelman 2004: 194; Andresen 2001: 260–5.

[82] D'Aquili and Newberg 1998: 199; cf. Shanon 2002: 264–6; Streng 1978: 147; Persinger 1987: 24–7; 2003*a*.

[83] Ludwig 1968: 77–81.

creators of the famous late Upper Palaeolithic paintings in Chauvet, Lascaux, and Altamira caves through the ancient Greeks to the modern users of psychedelic drugs. In the modern reports of altered states of consciousness, most common are visual percepts, which start to emerge as the mind moves along the intensified trajectory. It is important that they are 'seen' with eyes either open or closed and issue from the inner processes developing in the brain. At the outset, laboratory subjects 'see' various geometric percepts; at the next stage, they try to explain these visions, whether zigzags, grids, or bright or dark spots, on the basis of their cultural experience: a zigzag may be perceived as a snake, etc.

Proceeding further, many people experience a passage through a rotating dark space which they define as tunnel, cave, corridor, pipe, well, spiral, pit, vessel, or swirl.[84] The tunnel-like perspective often terminates in bright light in the centre of the field of vision, the light sometimes described as warm or kindly, or as brightly lit human forms. Various images appear on the walls of the dark tunnel or alley.[85] This experience, usually called mental vortex, is one of the most common in laboratory experiments investigating the effects of stress and various hallucinogens,[86] and frequently appears in anthropological accounts of altered states of consciousness as experienced by shamans and other religious practitioners.[87] The vortex is also characteristic of near-death experiences, but rarely occurs in normal physical conditions.[88] While Westerners describe their mental vortex as a tunnel or corridor or alley, people of other cultures may define it as passing into the depths of the earth or ocean through a hole, pipe, or along the roots of a tree.[89] Thus, K. Rasmussen describes the way of an Inuit Eskimo shaman:

For the very greatest [shamans], a way opens right from the house whence they invoke their helping spirits; a road down through the earth, if they are in a tent on shore, or down through the sea, if it is in a snow hut on the sea

[84] Siegel 1977: 136. [85] Siegel 1980: 923.

[86] Siegel and Jarvik 1975: 116, 143.

[87] Shamans: Harner 1990: 28–30; Siegel and Jarvik 1975: 127; Jewish apocalyptists: 1 En. 14: 8–24; cf. Merkur 1989: 136–7; Carlsson 2004: 36–41.

[88] Drab 1981.

[89] Harner 1990: 25; Lewis-Williams 2002: 129.

ice, and by this route the shaman is led down without encountering an obstacle. He almost glides as if falling through a tube so fitted to his body that he can check the process by pressing against the sides, and needs not actually fall down with a rush. This tube is kept open for him by all the souls of his namesakes, until he returns on his way back to earth.[90]

The tunnel experience may, very rarely, be envisaged in sexual terms. Thus, the shamans of the Tukano Amazonian Indians conceive their ecstatic visions as incestuous return to the cosmic womb.[91] This notion is so exceptional that it cannot, by any means, be cited to justify the interpretation of caves as wombs of the earth, a concept still current in scholarly literature, but apparently grounded on meagre anthropological or historical evidence, as well as the notion of the all-embracing universal mother-goddess.[92]

Tunnels are ubiquitous in hallucinations induced by various means, and even at the instant just before sleep, the hypnagogic stage which still pertains to the normal trajectory.[93] Tubes and tunnels are characteristic of Westerners' accounts of drug hallucinations:

'I'm moving through some kind of a train tunnel. There are all sorts of lights and colors.'

'It's sort of like a tube, like I sort of feel . . . that I'm at the bottom of a tube looking up.'

'I am traveling into a tunnel and out into space.'[94]

At the peak of the tunnel experience, the hallucinating person sees himself among iconic images which may combine geometric, zoomorphic, and anthropomorphic features; they undergo fantastic metamorphoses, deriving from the experiencer's cultural luggage and memory. He may see himself turning into an animal or undergoing other frightening transformations. This stage is emotionally charged and makes a profound impact on the person undergoing it.[95]

[90] Harner 1990: 26; similar accounts of other Inuit shamans: Merkur 1985: 207–8, 214, 216.

[91] Lewis 1989: 52. [92] Talalay 1994. [93] Blackmore 1993: 71.

[94] Siegel 1980: 923. [95] Siegel and Jarvik 1975: 128.

All the senses are involved in the experience of the vortex: people hear voices and sounds, feel breathless and weightless (therefore floating or flying), their vision may blur, and they may gain the impression of being in a different world. These sensations, which are universal, result from the neurological processes in the human brain.[96] As a result of the identification of the vortex leading to the netherworld with caves and subterranean passages, these natural features were regarded as entrances into the world beneath the earth: 'spiritual' experiences were thus accorded 'topographic reality'.[97] Access to a cavern would therefore be seen as penetration of the lower tier of the cosmos, the world of the dead and the chthonic gods. The image of the cave developed into a major chthonic symbol, and magic potency was attributed to contact with underground spaces.

In different cultures, entering a dark void gives rise to the notion of being in an underground passage to the netherworld, while flying is interpreted as a celestial journey to the upper spheres inhabited by gods or spirits. Jewish mystical literature of late antiquity contains depictions of mystical visions of *yordei merkavah*, those who 'descend by the chariot'.[98] G. Stroumsa demonstrates that the experience of *yordei merkavah* was the mystical voyage into the netherworld, ending in the vision of the divine world or even of the divinity itself.[99] The miraculous flight of the Prophet Muhammad through the darkness of the night to the throne of glory in Jerusalem is another example of a similar phenomenon.[100] Thus, even descriptions of flights to the heaven can comprise passages through the darkness, which means that the visions of the celestial journeys included vortex experiences.

In many societies, ancient Greek among them, visions were culturally valued and actively sought. Hallucinations attained in altered states of consciousness were deemed to be divine revelations of the ultimate truth. In the visions, the way to these revelations often led through a vortex, described in terms known to every given epoch. As a result, images of the mental vortex, such as caves, vessels, fissures, etc., are, as might be

[96] Siegel 1980: 923; Drab 1981: 145–6; Lewis-Williams 2002: 145.

[97] Lewis-Williams 2002: 209.

[98] The common and misleading translation is those who 'descend to the chariot'. For the *merkavah* literature, see Sholem 1965; Gruenwald 1980; Carlsson 2004: 36–41.

[99] Stroumsa 1996: 169–83.

[100] Renaud 1987; Piemontese 1987.

expected, prominent in the symbolism of the mystic quest of superhuman wisdom. Furthermore, the passage leading to the revelation became a necessary attribute of this quest. The image of vortex conceived as cave attracted mystics to real-life caves as cultic sites where altered states of consciousness could be achieved. In fact, ancient and modern Indian peoples of the American South-West believed (and still believe) that the spirits passed to and from the netherworld through holes in the floor of subterranean ceremonial chambers known as *kivas*.[101]

Caves became symbolic of the passage from this world to the divine realm of the ultimate truth, because images of the caves (in the form of vortex or tunnel sensations) often appear in hallucinations culminating in experiences of celestial bliss or revelation. Vortex, 'the cave in the mind',[102] took on physical shape and reality in the world of waking consciousness.

3. HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE CAVE

Caves humble and overwhelm human beings. His rationality notwithstanding, Seneca succumbed to the numinosity of a huge cavern: 'When a cave supports a mountain on rocks deeply eroded from within, not made by human hand, but excavated to such size by natural causes, your soul is seized by a religious apprehension.'[103] Cave experiences are many-sided. Caves are sometimes difficult to get to; entering a cave means crossing the border between the worlds of the familiar and the unknown, a very significant action bringing about discomfort, fear, and even true claustrophobia. Disorientation, diminished vision, as well as changes in olfactory and auditory perception make even a short stay in a deep cave very different from the routine experience of most people, notwithstanding their cultural and social diversity.[104]

The frightening cave environment is therefore most suitable for rites of passage, providing the milieu for the three-stage process which

[101] Plog 2003: 18, 21; Harner 1990: 26–7.

[102] Lewis-Williams 2002: 204.

[103] *Ep.* 4. 41. 3.

[104] Ridden by fear, people who enter caves even for a short time may lose control of their actions and feelings, just as happened in the Marabar Caves to the characters of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*.

comprises crossing the threshold, life-changing trauma in the unfamiliar world, and ultimately return to the society in a profoundly different status.[105] It is therefore no surprise that all over the world caves often served as *mise-en-scènes* for initiation rites.[106]

Deep caves are pitch black and almost entirely sound-proof. When modern guides leading cave tours switch off electricity, and the visitors find themselves in absolute darkness, with only the gentle plop of distant drops of water or flutter of bat wings breaking the complete silence, even those with strong nerves grow tense. Now let us imagine a mystic, shaman, or visionary voluntarily entering a cave, perhaps after a fast, and staying there alone for some time.

When awake, the human mind needs to be occupied permanently. Without the objective 'noise' of sensory correction or reality testing, consciousness focuses solely on the subjective self. Elimination of external stimuli forces the mind to concentrate within itself, and brings about intensive discharge of inner imagery. This condition is known as sensory deprivation, and it changes the brain not only experientially, but also physiologically and biochemically.[107] Sensory deprivation is one of the common techniques of inducing altered states of consciousness.[108] Normal people participating in laboratory tests, when placed in dark sound-proof spaces, start to hallucinate after a few hours, experience the sensation of floating, or press the 'panic button' to be let out.[109] In an autobiographical account of experiments with a solitude/isolation tank, a physician and psychoanalyst J. C. Lilly describes his own 'dreamlike states, trancelike states, mystical states', which comprised encounters with celestial teachers and divine guardians, as well as trips into spaces 'where the energies and forces were so vast that there was no humanly conceivable way of transmitting these experiences in words in a book'.[110]

[105] Whitehouse 2001. [106] Roux 1999: 320–1.

[107] Solomon 1965; Zubek 1969; Austin 1998: 102–4.

[108] La Barre 1980: 39; Wulff 1997: 76; Zuckerman 1969; West 1975: 300; Martindale 1981: 316; Geels 1982: 44; Siikala 1982: 105; Merkur 1985: 172; Austin 1998: 102, 494; Joseph 2003*b*: 9.

[109] Suedfeld 1969; Kubie 1965; Vernon *et al.* 1965; Freedman *et al.* 1965; Martindale 1981: 99, 255; Winkelman 2000: 149; Austin 1998: 102.

[110] Lilly 1972: 40, 42. Lilly also experimented with LSD during isolation, which produced enhanced results. For our purposes it is important that isolation alone was sufficient to induce profound alterations of consciousness.

Floating in an isolation tank is the most radical way to cut off somatosensory input. However, sensory deprivation does not need to be extreme in order to result in altered states of consciousness. Withdrawal to caves and solitary places is known to lead to disruption of subsystems of consciousness and to the attainment of visions and revelations. Even reduction in information input or constant exposure to monotonous stimulation force the alert mind to start projecting its own contents onto the consciousness: the individual then has vivid fantasies or hallucinates. Psychiatrically healthy individuals isolated from human company, especially in featureless landscapes such as sea, desert, or snowy plain, report experiences of imaginary presence and other hallucinations.[111] Prolonged solitary confinement often induces hallucinations, which may persist long after this punishment.[112] Tunnel experience is a common element of visual imagery during hallucinations resulting from sensory deprivation.[113]

In a deep cave, under conditions of almost total suppression of sensory input, our mind enters a state of severe 'stimulus hunger', and the subjective self emerges forcefully. Cavers and geologists who specialize in the study of caves report visual and auditory hallucinations, especially after remaining underground for long periods.[114] Mystics and ascetics practising social isolation in order to achieve enlightenment attained alterations of consciousness by reducing external stimuli: dwelling in a cave, in a hollow tree, in an isolated cell, or at the top of a pillar not only reduced the distractions of the human society, but also caused disturbances in body image and auditory and visual hallucinations.[115]

Examples from various periods and cultures are abundant. Social isolation and sensory deprivation are among the most common techniques used by shamans in their deliberate vision quest. Round

[111] Hastin Bennet 1965; Shurley 1962; La Barre 1980: 43; Merkur 1985: 172; Wulff 1997: 76.

[112] La Barre 1980: 42.

[113] Shurley 1962: 89.

[114] Clottes 2004; for a different interpretation see Helvenston and Bahn 2004: 97–8.

[115] Ludwig 1968: 71; Wulff 1997; Blacker 1975: 50, 53, 63–4; Hollenback 1996: 96–119; Merkur 1993: 30–3; Roux 1999: 300–7, 310–15. Haruki Murakami weaves these ideas into the plot of his novel *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle,* making its main character descend into a deep well to live through a breathtaking adventure of hallucinations and visions.

about puberty, an individual suffering anxiety and/or sensing his shamanic vocation withdraws to a lonely place, such as cave, den, or hole in the snow, and stays there for several days, fasting. During this vigil the future shaman has a vision, which would guide him for the rest of his life.[116] Accounts of the rigorous spiritual discipline followed by Celtic seers before uttering prophecy include a preliminary period of seclusion, special diet, and absence of distraction.[117] Early Buddhists believed that in order to obtain supernatural powers (of invisibility, clairvoyance, travelling through the air, etc.) one had to 'bring his thoughts to a state of quiescence, practice diligently the trances, attain to insight, and be a frequenter of lonely places'.[118] The account of a yogic method of achieving knowledge of *Brachman*, the Absolute in the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, entails retirement to a solitary place, such as a mountain cave, as a prerequisite for meditation and realization of the truth.[119] In Senegal, the Wolof 'marabouts' still withdraw into caverns in order to obtain visions.[120]

According to the Jewish tradition, encounters of several spiritual leaders with their God took place in caverns. Moses spoke to the Lord in the Meeting Tent, but when he asked to see God's glory, the Lord placed him in a hollow of a rock.[121] Having fled from Jezebel, Elijah the prophet lived in a cave in the wilderness, and the voice of the God came unto him.[122] Jewish apocalyptists combined isolation in nocturnal darkness, fasting, sleep deprivation, and deliberate mood alteration, in order to attain visions and spiritual communion with the divine.[123] Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, miracle worker and sage, spent twelve years in a cave together with his son, absorbed in the study of the Torah. On their return to the world, they burnt people with their gaze, heard the voice of the God, consequently went back

[116] Merkur 1985: 134, 144, 171–6; 1993: 31; Winkelman 2002: 1876; Harner 1990: 22; Lewis 1989: 32.

[117] Chadwick 1942: 6.

[118] *Mejjhima-Nikâya*, quoted in Hollenback 1996: 190, 199; cf. Gimello 1978: 180–3 on 'calming' as a major component of meditation, and a very similar depiction of its by-products, i.e. the powers obtained by the meditater, and Austin 1998: 100–4 on the effects of somatosensory deprivation on Zen meditative training. See Gimello 1978: 171 on the Buddhist distinction between mysticism and meditation.

[119] Ellwood 1980: 49; Stace 1960: 42.

[120] Rouget 1990: 47, 52.

[121] Ex. 33: 22.

[122] 1 Kings 19: 9–18.

[123] Merkur 1989.

into the cave for another twelve months, left it again by the God's order, and performed miracles and purifications.[124] These narratives seem to reflect the popular belief that the withdrawal into a cave was inductive to numinous experiences of hearing or seeing the God.[125]

The most famous revelation ever recorded, the Apocalypse of St John, is supposed to have been written in a cave on the island of Patmos, where St John was banished in AD 95.[126] The cave, known as the Holy Grotto of Revelation, in now encircled by the monastery of St John the Theologian.[127] The legend associating the vision of the Apocalypse with a cave may have been prompted by the tradition of solitary contemplation as a way to enlightenment, which is attested in later Christianity.[128] An anonymous fourteenth-century mystical dialogue *Sister Katherine* gives an account of a beguine who went into an internal exile, experienced a three-day long mystical death, and returned to this world enlightened.[129] The contemplative life of Carmelite nuns is based on 'stripping away' all distractions by living in a bare cell, and by absolute silence.[130] St John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, speaks of 'the dark night' of the soul, meaning mortification of all the sensual and spiritual desires

[124] *Babylonian Talmud, Tactate Shabbat*, 33B–34A; Rosenfeld 1999. Rabbi Simeon's cave is shown now in the Druze village of Peqi'in in the Upper Galilee. Although the biblical and talmudic narrations explain respectively Elias's and Rabbi Simeon's stays in the caves by their fear of prosecution, the logic of both stories demonstrates that by fleeing to the caverns they endangered their lives (Shoshany 2007). R. Shoshany also argues that the cave story of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai is fashioned as a parallel to the biblical narration of Elias's stay in the cave.

[125] Guy Stroumsa drew my attention to the Jewish sect of the Magharians (*al-Maghariyyah)*, mentioned in the 10th cent. AD by the Karaite writer Al-Qirqisani, who says that the sect, founded in the 1st cent. BC, derived its designation, literally 'men of the caves', from the fact that they kept their sacred books in caves. The Magharians are identified with the ascetic Essenes, who are known to have lived in caves in the wilderness (for references and discussion see Singer and Broydé 1916; Fossum 1985: 229–31).

[126] Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.* 3. 18. 1; 3. 20. 8–9.

[127] I am grateful to John Glucker, who called my attention to St John's cave. In summer 2006, the historic centre of Patmos, including the famous cave, was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO.

[128] Cf. the list of dozens of Christian saints who stayed in caves for long periods: Roux 1999: 301–7.

[129] McGinn 2005: 243.

[130] Chadwick 1942: 66–8; Rouget 1990: 44.

and restriction of the imagination, memory, and understanding, as a precondition for the soul's travel towards the blissful union with God, infusing it with a secret wondrous wisdom.[131] The Shakers of Saint Vincent (the Antilles) still withdraw into 'secret rooms' where they undertake their spiritual journeys in isolation and immobility.[132] Thus, mystics of assorted denominations seek a 'kind of mentally induced anesthesia of corporeal senses'[133] in order to achieve the state of consciousness leading to mystical experience.

Lack of external input forces the mind to focus on every minimal stimulus the environment offers. If a particular sense, for example, hearing or sight, receives a slight amount of stimulation, this may enhance the likelihood of this sense's hallucination. Thus, rare sounds or a spot of light in the dense darkness of a cave may lead to especially vivid hallucinations.[134] Concentration on a limited stimulus and restriction of the senses are well-known in many Eastern techniques of meditation, which ultimately lead to altered states of consciousness. When practised in an open space, such concentration requires prolonged apprenticeship. In a dark sound-proof space an unprepared person can achieve intense concentration leading to altered states of consciousness relatively quickly. Techniques of imagery cultivation based on focus of attention and dissociation from senses and desires can be successfully applied in caves and dark chambers. During intense contemplation of a trivial visual or audible item it acquires cosmic salience, and occupies the mind craving for activity: 'to see a world in a grain of sand'.[135]

[131] Stace 1960: 186–96. [132] Rouget 1990: 54.

[133] Hollenback 1996: 170.

[134] West 1997: 501; Martindale 1981: 317; Austin 1998: 102.

[135] William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*. These observations have been recently endorsed by laboratory experiments measuring changes in brain activity during meditation belonging to various traditions, such yoga, Zen, and transcendental meditation. The results showed that during meditation the attention associated area was activated, which means that the subjects were focusing their attention, while the activity in the orientation association area of the brain decreased, which may be associated with the change in the practitioners' sense of space and time, as well as their sense of self and other, that occurs during meditation (Austin 1998: 88–93; Newberg and D'Aquili 2000: 66; D'Aquili and Newberg 1999: 119; Winkelman 2000: 167–70; Spezio 2001: 481; Wulff 1997: 179–88; Newberg and Iversen 2003: 257–67; cf. Andresen 2001: 265).

Examples of hallucinations related to decrease in or impairment of sensory input are known to clinical medicine. Progressive loss of hearing may lead to auditory hallucinations, and visual hallucinations are observed in patients with cataracts.[136] Experiments in sensory deprivation demonstrate that mental sanity depends upon a constant input of sensory experience. Absence of one sensory modality may induce pathology: people who have become deaf, deprived of a chief means of social intercourse, often develop mildly paranoid delusions.[137] Since sight is the predominant sense in primates, humans included, blindness, or even the restriction of visual perception, affects the personality even more profoundly. As one of the consequences, a person develops a proclivity for hallucinations and other forms of 'inner sight' which may be regarded as (divinely) inspired visions or clairvoyance.

Chemical aspects of sensory deprivation are most revealing. Many hallucinogenic drugs act by impairing sensory input.[138] Altered states of consciousness, usually associated with drug consumption, can also be reached without these external aids.[139] Endorphins, natural opiates in the brain, act as natural euphoriants in the human body, and one of the triggers of endorphin discharge is sensory deprivation.[140] Hence, blocking sensory input in any way seems to lead to visions and hallucinations, irrespective of the technique employed, whether drug use or withdrawal to an isolated place.

In neurological terms, there is no consensus on the biochemical and neurophysiological mechanism of hallucination in a state of sensory deprivation.[141] Subjective senses of absolute spacelessness and of limitlessness of self are prominent in the descriptions of sensory deprivation. A. B. Newberg and E. D'Aquili explicate these senses as resulting from the total shutdown of neural input, which results in lack of information necessary to the brain for the creation of images of the spatial context and the self. Its only remaining option is to

[136] Heron 1965: 31; Shurley 1962: 88; West 1975: 303;1997: 501.
[137] La Barre 1980: 42; West 1975: 303.
[138] Iversen 2001: 53 (on morphine and morphine-like drugs).
[139] Zuckerman 1969: 122.
[140] Lewis 1989: 10, 34; Blackmore 1993: 107; Winkelman 2004: 208.
[141] Wulff 1997: 77; D'Aquili and Newberg 1998: 194; Newberg *et al.* 2001: 40; Lex 1979: 132–47; Newberg and D'Aquili 2000: 56; cf. Andresen 2001: 260–1.

adopt that mental image of the physical space which is possible in these conditions, that of a boundless self in a void. This sensation would be interpreted by the mind as infinite space and eternity, or spacelessness and timelessness. The sensation of limitless self, or no self at all, would be perceived after the event as the experience of being one with the universe or creator.[142]

Another subjective result of sensory isolation may be reaching an out-of-body experience (OBE), known also as ecsomatic state, transport, soul flight, soul journey, or astral projection. Such experiences range from brief, 'everyday' sensations of watching oneself from a distance, which can be felt while quite awake, to a deep mystical state. They can also be induced by drugs, such as LSD, psilocybin and mescalin, and are often felt in near-death states.[143] Cross-cultural distribution of these experiences suggests that they result from the common neurological characteristics of the human mind.[144]

The psychologist S. Blackmore not only studied the subject, but also reported out-of-body experiences, during which she flew around the room, then over the town, and eventually over large parts of the globe.[145] She describes the characteristics of out-of-body states and the way to reach them:

> The experiencers usually feel as though they can travel anywhere and see anything they wish. In most cases they seem to have another complete body, a sort of double, although in some cases there is just something like a disembodied awareness, or awareness of being at a certain spot but without anything visible being there . . .
>
> Some people thoroughly enjoy their OBEs and would love to be able to have them more often. Some gain a certain amount of control over where they go and what they see. Some can even induce them at will. There are many books describing the techniques available . . . These range from simple imagery and relaxation methods to complicated regimes involving special diets and sensory isolation. Even so, they all share some common features. To teach yourself to have an OBE you need to be able to relax, withdraw from the sensory impressions coming from the world around you and

[142] Newberg *et al.* 2001: 119.

[143] Green 1968; Gabbard and Twemlow 1984.

[144] Winkelman 2000: 88–92; Chadwick 1942: 71–3, 90–105. See Eliade 1956 for 'magical flight' in comparative anthropological perspective; Carlsson 2004 for 'heavenly journeys' in early Judaism and Christianity.

[145] Blackmore 1993: 231.

somehow imagine you are leaving the body. Really all the various methods are variations on this theme.[146]

S. Blackmore suggests that the psychological mechanism of entering an out-of-body state is based on a breakdown in the normal model of reality, which is a conglomerate of images of the body and of the outside world, depending on sensory information supplied by the body to the brain. Drugs can confuse this model by means of sensory distortions. The input may be cut down by acute trauma or self-induced withdrawal, enhanced by meditation. In sensory deprivation, the lack of visual and somatosensory input leads to a state where information is inadequate for construction of a model of one's inside and outside world, and the brain creates another model, based on memory and imagination. Thus, an out-of-body experience is reached.[147]

During an out-of-body experience, an individual feels fantastic delight, which may be of brief or prolonged duration.[148] Many experiencers report a feeling that an unusually wide range of information is accessible to them in the ecsomatic state.[149] As is the case with other altered states of consciousness, the individual is left with a conviction that the experience was real, but he is unable to put it into words. It is noteworthy that a considerable proportion of out-of-body experiencers report the tunnel sensation,[150] which means that out-of-body experiences often include visions of caves, discussed in Section 2 of this chapter. On the other hand, withdrawal from the world, 'blankness of mind',[151] an essential component of the techniques of inducing this state, is more easily accomplished in closed spaces, be it rooms or caves.

Thus, caves and dark spaces, creating conditions of stimulus hunger or sensory deprivation, can be instrumental in attaining

[146] Blackmore 1993: 170–1.

[147] Ibid. 175–7; cf. Winkelman 2000: 90.

[148] Gabbard and Twemlow 1984: 22–3: in 68% of cases experiencers report having felt freedom, 72% calm, and 55% joy. For 85% their out-of-body experience was 'very pleasant', to 73% it granted 'lasting benefits', and 43% characterized it as 'the greatest thing that ever happened to them'. See Green 1968: 37–41, 85–7 on the senses of completeness and well-being during the ecsomatic state.

[149] Green 1968: 119–25.

[150] Gabbard and Twemlow 1984: 26%.

[151] Green 1968: 112.

various altered states of consciousness, ranging from intense contemplation to visions, hallucinations, and out-of-body experiences.

4. NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

Near-death experiences are profound subjective events reported in contemporary studies by a quarter to one third of people interviewed who have been on the verge of death or were believed or pronounced clinically dead—but ultimately survived.[152] In the modern Western world, a growing number of dangerously ill patients are treated successfully in hospitals or resuscitated, hence given an opportunity to report their experience. During earlier epochs and in other parts of the world, the number of such accounts was naturally much lower, since most near-death experiences ended in death.

The aetiology of these events has not yet been compellingly established.[153] Near-death experiences comprise enhanced cognitive functioning, including panoramic replay of one's life and meetings with people, animals, and fantastic monsters; out-of-body experiences, a sense of being in a different realm, transcending the boundaries of ego and limitations of space and time; a strong positive sensation of encounter with a source of all-embracing light, wisdom, and love. These sensations are typically described as ineffable, but they entail enduring personality transformations in individuals who have lived through them, among them dramatic reduction in the fear of death.[154]

The phenomenon of near-death experiences had been known for millennia under a variety of designations[155] before the term was coined in 1975 by R. A. Moody,[156] an American psychiatrist and philosopher whose *Life After Life* launched a vehement ongoing discussion. In addition to a flood of scientific and popular publications, documentary

[152] Sabom 1982: 57; Geyson 2000: 460; Blackmore 1993: 34. Gabbard and Twemlow 1984: 126: about 5% of the population of the USA has had a near-death experience.

[153] Sabom 1982: 150–86; Gabbard and Twemlow 1984: 128–34; Blackmore 1993: 260–4.

[154] Moody 1976: 88–97; Sabom 1982: 14–23; Siegel 1980: 912; Geyson 1994: 169.

[155] Moody 1976: 115–28; Blackmore 1993: 8–16.

[156] Moody 1976.

and fiction movies, several periodicals were launched, dedicated entirely to near-death experiences, such as *Journal of Near Death Studies, Anabiosis,* and *Omega.*[157] The subject has been compromised to a certain extent as a result of its active exploitation by an assortment of modern proponents of mystical spirituality, who proclaim near-death experiences as the ultimate proof of the existence of afterlife.[158] Fortunately, various aspects of near-death experiences are being studied by scientists from several disciplines, including sociologists, medical practitioners, and neuroscientists, and discussed in publications based on rational evaluation of empirical data. Although physiological and socio-psychological factors have been hypothesized as instigators of near-death experiences, on the whole this condition still remains unexplained.[159]

No two experiences are identical, and not all the experiences contain the same components, but they occur consistently in various combinations. Research conducted by several scientists, based on different approaches, confirms the recurrence of the core features of near-death experiences, although the evaluations of their role differ.[160] R. A. Moody proposes the following model; while far from being scientific or based on a statistical medically checked sample, this composite account is a keystone in the literature on near-death experiences:

> A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly along a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside of his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from his unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval.
>
> After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a 'body,' but one of a very different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm

[157] Cf. Siegel 1980: 913.
[158] Blackmore 1993: 4–5.
[159] Geyson 2000: 461.
[160] Blackmore 1993: 25–33.

spirit of a kind he has never encountered—a being of light—appears before him. This being asks him a question, nonverbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point he finds himself approaching some sort of barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet, he finds that he must go back to the earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point he resists, for by now he is taken up with his experiences in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives.

Later he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still, the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life.[161]

Near-death experiences and out-of-body experiences are manifested universally.[162] Its core element, the soul flight, involving a view of the experiencer's self from the outside perspective, occurs during both near-death crisis and shamanic training. Essentially, a shaman or a mystic deliberately accesses the realm where others arrive only at the time of death.[163] It is by no means coincidental that near-death experiences evoke awareness of shamanic or mystic vocation and induce profound personality changes, as accounts of modern survivors demonstrate.[164] The homologies of these states 'reflect their inner basis in psychophysiological structures as forms of self-representation that are a natural response of the human nervous system'.[165]

It has been observed by many that accounts of near-death survivors strongly resemble descriptions of drug-induced hallucinations.[166] The ineffability which is particularly characteristic of all of them probably ensues from suppression of verbal behaviour, related to states of central nervous system activity.[167] Entering dark spaces with a source of bright and/or loving light at their end and hearing loud ringing or buzzing noises have been reported by many individuals who were conscious while dying, as well as by people recovering after near-death experience,

[161] Moody 1976: 21–3. [162] Blackmore 1993: 22. [163] Harner 1990.
[164] Green 2001: 210. [165] Winkelman 2002: 1880; cf. Siegel 1980: 920.
[166] Cf. Blackmore 1993: 43. [167] Siegel 1980: 922.

and these are regarded by researchers as core characteristics of near-death experiences.[168] The dark space is referred to as 'a cave, a well, a trough, an enclosure, a tunnel, a funnel, a vacuum, a void, a sewer, a valley, and a cylinder'.[169] As in the case of the visions of vortex discussed above, in near-death hallucinations, tunnels and corridors often appear together with geometric figures and other forms of great luminosity and brilliance, sometimes interpreted by experiencers as cities of light. The tunnel may be swirling or broadening toward its far end. Most experiencers pass through tunnels to the transcendental, some up and some down, but very few return through them to this world.[170] Accounts of these journeys through tunnels or corridors bear a striking resemblance to the above-cited descriptions of the vortex experience during drug-induced hallucinations.

'I could see my body lying there . . . I saw the whole show . . . I was going up slowly, like floating in a dark or semi-dark corridor . . . They [the medical staff] were working the hell out of me . . . And I kept thinking: What is this? . . . I kept going up and up and up . . . And then I went further . . . I went to a different world.'[171]

'I felt like I was riding a roller coaster train at an amusement park, going through this tunnel at a tremendous speed.'[172]

'I was going down a long black tunnel with a tremendous alive sort of light bursting in at the far end. I shot out of the tunnel into this light. I was the light, I was part of it, and I knew everything.'[173]

'I found myself in a tunnel—a tunnel of concentric circles . . . a spiraling tunnel.'[174]

[168] Blackmore 1993: 26, 67–93; Siegel 1980: 912, 919; Gabbard and Twemlow 1984: 124–5; Drab 1981; Lindley *et al.* 1981: 123, 108 (two sets of statistics, assembled in two independent studies, one reporting sensations of darkness in 23% of cases, and sensations of light in 16%, and the other in 38% and 56% respectively); Sabom 1982: 39–44 (giving statistics in table 8: 23% of the cases he assembled include passage through a dark region or void; 28% include seeing the light); Woerlee 2004.

[169] Moody 1976: 31. One wonders if a near-death vision of the tunnel could serve as the source of inspiration for Hieronymus Bosch, whose painting 'The Ascension of the Blessed', one of the four panels of *The Last Judgment* at Palazzo Ducale in Venice, represent the blessed souls approaching the glory of light through a dark tunnel.

[170] Drab 1981; cf. Moody 1976: 82.

[171] Sabom 1982: 42.

[172] Siegel 1980: 913.

[173] Drab 1981: 126.

[174] Moody 1976: 33.

It has been argued that tunnel experiences are typical of Westerners only and are absent from near-death accounts originating in less privileged parts of the world, supposedly because people living in underdeveloped societies have no memories of tunnels.[175] However, this assumption derives from a misconceived approach, based on a very limited sample of accounts.[176] S. Blackmore reports that in a chance sample of twelve accounts of some sort of 'brush with death' which she conducted in Bombay, eight included depictions of near-death experiences; three of the eight reported passage through a dark space, four saw bright light, four experienced joy or peace, and three claimed effects on their lives—all elements reported in the West. 'We find not a complete duplication of identical features but rather similar features appearing in different forms across times and cultures.'[177] Even those maintaining that tunnel experience is culture-specific agree that passage through darkness or void is cross-cultural.[178] This passage is described by individuals in accordance with their cultural background as tunnel, corridor, or subterranean passage to the world of the spirits.

The neurological mechanism behind the tunnel sensation is the subject of debate.[179] Despite the lack of conclusive explanation, modern medicine and neuroscience regard frequent occurrence of darkness, tunnel, and light sensations as a common element of near-death experiences.

Near-death experiences include panoramic memory reviews and meeting in the world of beyond with other people alive or deceased, and with various fantastic creatures. Both phenomena are explained as retrieved memory images. Amazingly, the visions sometimes

[175] Kellehear 1996: 22–41; cf. Groves 1996.

[176] Kellehear dismisses numerous reports of passages through 'darkness', 'void', 'dark tubular calyx', by non-Westerners as different from the tunnel experience of the Westerners. He is able to cite only twelve accounts of near-death experiences by hunter-gatherers; it is significant that at least one of them, by a native Maori woman, features a descent into a subterranean passage into the realm of the spirits (Kellehear 1996: 31).

[177] Blackmore 1993: 19.

[178] Kellehear 1996: 35.

[179] Blackmore 1993: 77–81. For various theories see: Siegel 1980: 923, 925; Blackmore and Troscianko 1989; Blackmore 1991, 1993: 81–93; Woerlee 2004.

concern the future, which would account for numerous instances of deathbed prophecy in many cultures.

Though possibly based on temporal lobe activation and recall of stored information, these 'memories' also include anticipated future events. The panoramic view or 'flash of life' is vivid, spontaneous, colorful, three-dimensional, kinetic, and veridical, all common features of hallucinations produced by states of central nervous system arousal.[180]

Like mystical experiences and other altered states of consciousness, near-death phenomena often

include transcendence of space and time; awe, wonder, and a sense of sacredness, deeply felt positive mood, often accompanied by intense emotions of peace and tranquility; a feeling of insight and illumination or of understanding some universal truth or knowledge (the 'noetic quality'); and changed attitudes and beliefs that pass into an afterglow and remain as vivid memory.[181]

The 'complex near-death imagery' is associated with depersonalization (altered perception of time and space, sense of detachment, transcendence, etc.), a common reaction to life-threatening danger, which may be accompanied by dissociation.[182] The disengagement of the dying from physical stimuli and concerns and the focus on self-reflection could account for these elaborate hallucinations. Moreover, 'the deathbed itself may be a unique setting for the production of hallucinatory phenomena'.[183] It has been found that reclining position and a state of anxiety generate perceptual isolation, which can trigger visions within ten minutes. Serious threats to the body, certainly the threat of death, activate fantasies and remote memories, which minimize the patient's involvement in the traumatic perceptual field, and transfer him to the world where the threat does not exist.[184] Thus, to a certain extent near-death experiences approximate the self-imposed condition of sensory deprivation.[185]

Finally, it is important to note that, for many survivors, near-death experiences are the most intense and happiest moments of their lives.

[180] Siegel 1980: 923. [181] Ibid. 924.
[182] Ibid. 926, cf. Blackmore 1993: 29. [183] Siegel 1980: 925.
[184] Ibid. [185] Blackmore 1993: 42.

These moments are typically remembered as 'realer than real'.[186] Transcendental sensations of oneness with the universe and/or with the loving supreme being are later recalled as glimpses of direct vision of the ultimate reality, altering one's attitude to life and death,[187] and in some cases resulting in a dramatic change in lifestyle bordering on conversion.[188] A remarkable core feature of a great part of these experiences is a tunnel leading to a source of light. The lore of near-death experiences presumably had some impact on the establishment of various spiritual systems, inspiring the notion of the passage through the darkness to the eternity and truth and giving rise to the manifold role of caves and chasms in mystical ideas and practices.

5. ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS, SHAMANISM, AND ANCIENT GREECE

Several times in this chapter altered states of consciousness have been associated, *inter alia*, with shamans. The significance of shamanism as a cultural and religious phenomenon was established by M. Eliade in his *Shamanism*, first published in 1951.[189] The word 'shaman' originates in the Tungus language of Siberia, and derives from the root which means 'to know': as a noun, it refers to 'one who is excited or raised', as a verb it means 'to know in an ecstatic manner'.[190] 'Shaman' denotes an indigenous religious practitioner who in altered states of consciousness reaches the heaven and the netherworld and acquires the ability to establish contact with spirits, manipulate souls in different ways, heal the sick, and control weather, as well as other natural phenomena.

The use of this term in modern scholarship is ardently disputed. In the absence of an agreed definition, some even propose dropping the

[186] Ibid. 7; Sabom 1982: 16.

[187] Moody 1976: 58–64; Blackmore 1993: 146; Gabbard and Twemlow 1984: more than 70%.

[188] Becker 1981; Gabbard and Twemlow 1984: 125.

[189] Eliade 1974.

[190] Pearson 2002: 73–4.

term altogether.[191] The proponents of the emic approach claim that the term 'shaman' should be employed only in the context of Siberian cultures, where it originally belonged.[192] An influential group of scholars believes that shamanism has etic status, and ' "shamanism" usefully points to a human universal—the need to make sense of shifting consciousness—and the way in which this is accomplished, especially, but not always, among hunters-gatherers'.[193] The cross-cultural nature of shamanism is recognized in the definition of the 'central idea of shamanism [which] is to establish means of contact with the supernatural world by the ecstatic experience of a professional and inspired intermediary, the shaman'.[194] As regards his role, the shaman is 'a technician of consciousness who utilizes those potentials for healing and for personal and social transformations'.[195]

The use of the term 'shamanism' need not obscure the diversity of shamanic practices and ideologies in various parts of the globe, or the divergence between shamanic cults from the Upper Palaeolithic period up to the present. Since general concepts in anthropology (and other social sciences and humanities) rarely conform exactly to actual situations, the concept of shamanism may be employed productively in accounting for the data, creating models and suggesting points of comparison for cross-cultural research.[196]

There are various universals of shamanism as a specific complex of core characteristics found among the magico-religious practitioners in hunter-gatherer societies, as well as simple pastoral and agricultural societies around the world. They include altered states of consciousness known as soul journey or flight; relations with the spirit world as the basis for other activities; training through deliberately induced altered states of consciousness and initiatory death-and-rebirth experience; vision quest; divination; magical healing focused on soul; animal relations, including transformations into animals; hunting magic;

[191] Klein *et al.* 2002. [192] Siikala 1987; cf. recently McCall 2007.

[193] Lewis-Williams 2002: 133. The etic approach was launched by M. Eliade (1974: 6) and followed by Winkelman 2000: 64; Pearson 2002: esp. 74, to mention only a few names. The divergence of opinions is illustrated by the discussion of the paper by Klein *et al.* 2002, most commentators denouncing the authors' emic approach.

[194] Hultkrantz 1978: 30.

[195] Winkelman 2000: 6.

[196] R. Hamayon in 'Comments' on Klein *et al.* 2002: 406–7.

and charismatic group leadership. The fact that these manifestations are observed worldwide implies that the concept of shaman has a cross-cultural status.[197] They reflect neurophenomenological and neurognostic structures, forms of experience and knowing grounded in innate human biological and symbolic capacities.[198] Many researchers would agree that the shamanic complex reveals most clearly the connection between various altered states of consciousness and the notion of direct contact with the supernatural.[199]

For our purposes, two inferences are essential. First, the assumption that shamanism shares the same neurological basis as other hallucinatory experiences implies that empirical data and explanatory models developed for shamanism may be applied in comparative discussion of other cultural phenomena involving altered states of consciousness, including those testified to in ancient Greece.

Another crucial question is whether Greek ascetic visionaries and mystics owe their techniques, lore, cosmology, or any other part of their practice and teaching to shamanism (with which they were acquainted in its Scythian version).[200] The importance of shamanism in Greek religion, myth, and philosophy, first proposed by E. Rohde and H. Diels,[201] was studied in detail by K. Meuli and G. Moravcsik, who independently identified shamanic elements in some Archaic (mid-eighth–sixth centuries) legends of ecstatics and purifiers of pestilence, connected with the Northern Black sea realm.[202] Moravcsik's work remained largely unknown in the West, whereas Meuli's insights were developed in the work of E. R. Dodds, W. Burkert, M. West, and other leading experts in the history of Greek and Scythian religion.[203] In fact, the evidence for the attribution of shamanic elements in the

[197] Winkelman 2004: 195; 2000: 57–63; cf. Harner 1990: 20, 40–2; Pearson 2002: 65–76.

[198] Winkelman 2002: 1874.

[199] Cf. La Barre 1980: 83, who seems to go too far in regarding shamanism as the source of all religion.

[200] For a discussion of Scythian shamanism see Ustinova 1999: 75–9, with references. See also Margreth 1993.

[201] Diels 1897; Rohde 1925.

[202] Meuli 1935; Moravchik 1936.

[203] Dodds 1973: 141–4; Burkert 1972: 140–65; West 1983: 149, 259; cf. Cornford 1952: 88–106; Nilsson 1960: 45;1961–7: i. 164; Kahn 1960: 32; Metzler 1982; Kindstrand 1981; Bongrad-Levi and Grantovskiy 1983: 94–8; Brisson 1987: 95; Flint *et al.* 1999: 100, 117–19.

Greek culture to the Scythian influence is limited, and hence many doubt it: J. Bremmer argues that it is impossible to prove convincingly that the archaic Greeks adopted Scythian shamanistic practices.[204] P. Bonnechere suggests employing a broader term, 'ecstatic elements in Greek religion', rather than 'shamanism'.[205] The lack of clear-cut evidence pointing to Scythia encouraged the search in other directions. For instance, M. West in his recent works links Greek shamanic practices to Anatolia,[206] whereas K. Dowden traces Greek ecstatic ideas to India.[207] Some classical scholars adopt the emic approach and claim that the application of the intrinsically misleading 'phenomenology' of shamanism to the Greek culture is methodologically erroneous.[208]

The neuropsychological approach described earlier in this chapter renders redundant the demonstration of factual and logical inaccuracy of the diffusionist approach. The main misconception of the 'shamanistic' theory is that it associates all altered states of consciousness with shamanism, more specifically with its Scythian variety, ignoring and hence failing to explain the existence of similar phenomena in other cultural traditions. In fact, there are other methods of explanation apart from diffusion. Trance oracles announcing the utterance of the divinity by means of mediums, as well as incubation oracles, were very popular in ancient Greece. Such oracles were active till recently in Japan, and still exist in Tibet.[209] Are these institutions related? To reduce the situation *ad absurdum*: are all rites of passage from adolescence into maturity which are observed around the globe connected to common 'ancestor rites'? Existence of such parallels does not necessarily mean that the later institution draws on the earlier one, or that both derive from a common historical source. They may have developed independently in several cultural areas.

Cross-cultural manifestations of altered states of consciousness, and characteristically shamanic practices among them, are rooted in psychobiological structures and basic functions of the brain:[210] 'the desire to alter consciousness is an innate, human, biologically based drive'.[211] The worldwide similarity of phenomena focused around

[204] Bremmer 1983: 24–53; 2002: 27–40; Zhmud 1997: 108–16.
[205] Bonnechere 2003: 145.
[206] West 1997*a*: 150.
[207] Dowden 1979, 1980.
[208] Macris 2003: 268.
[209] Blacker 1981: 84; Arnott 1989.
[210] Winkelman 2002: 1873.
[211] Winkelman 2000: 7; cf. Iversen 2001: 73.

manipulation of consciousness and mental imagery cultivation derives from the common neural basis of consciousness.

Hence, 'traces of shamanism' in ancient Greece do not need to be explicated as 'vestiges of pre-Olympian world'. Nor did the ancient Greeks have to borrow from abroad techniques of reaching altered states of consciousness or accounts of ecstatic revelations. Being human, they could not escape encounters with such states which had existed within their own culture from times immemorial. The Greek attitude to these states and in particular to people experiencing them might fluctuate by period or place, but the basic human propensity to experience altered states of consciousness in certain situations remained unaltered. These ecstatic states could be interpreted as descents into the netherworld, mental flights, or divine revelations, in accordance with cultural milieu and personal inclinations of the experiencers. The conclusion that the Greeks did not need to borrow ecstatic techniques from abroad implies that the diffusionist model should be abandoned. This inference is significant for the study of other spheres of Greek culture, such as the ideas of the soul and the afterlife.

CONCLUSIONS

Explanatory theories of cultural phenomena provided by neuroscience and cognitive psychology are accepted by a growing number of researchers. It is now abundantly clear that human consciousness is largely defined by the neurological functions which are characteristic of *Homo sapiens* as a biological species, irrespective of social conditions. Hence, the conclusions of modern neuroscience are applicable to the study of historical phenomena, including ancient Greek religion and philosophy. Neuropsychology provides a methodological basis for the study of the consciousness of religious practitioners and its transformation in different environments. Especially revealing is the study of altered states of consciousness which, in many cases, entails a sense of ineffable revelation of superhuman truth. Since such states of consciousness often occur when people are exposed to sensory deprivation, seers, shamans, and other mediators between

gods and mortals undergo long isolated sojourns in caves and other closed spaces in their quest for ecstatic illumination. Thus, on the one hand, caves serve as an environment that facilitates reaching visions and revelations. On the other hand, caves as mental images are characteristic of altered states of consciousness induced by a wide range of techniques. The sensation of passing through a tunnel or cave is common at early stages of altered states of consciousness and occurs in accounts of hallucinations and revelations, sometimes interpreted by experiencers as conductive to superhuman wisdom. The tunnel sensation is also characteristic of near-death experiences, which appear to have influenced assorted mystical ideas and practices. Finally, it is apparent from assessment of the cross-cultural nature of altered states of consciousness that the out-of-body sensations and ecstatic insights of the Greek visionaries and sages were not imported from abroad, but developed inside the Greek culture, ensuing from the universals of human consciousness.

2

Oracles and Caves

One of the initial frustrating findings awaiting a historian of Greek oracles is that many phenomena which would appear basic and indispensable for the understanding of vatic practices remain obscure. Oracles were so famous, all-important, and well-known that the Greek authors, who diligently report anecdotes on the consultations by prominent figures or noteworthy predictions, fail to give even minimal accounts of the procedures of oracle-giving. As a result, we know nothing about the way in which many of the oracles worked, even the most important and ancient ones, such as the oracles of Apollo at Abae and at Gryneum.[1] When written sources ignore the technicalities of the oracular practices, we are completely dependent on archaeological remains. Not only is their interpretation often problematic, but in many cases no archaeological traces have survived. For instance, if the site of Ptoion had not been explored in the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries, we would have never known that this oracular sanctuary comprised an artificial grotto: it has collapsed since then, and is not mentioned in the surviving written sources.[2] It is very probable that in many cases we are not as fortunate as in the case of Ptoion, and the existence of many natural or artificial grottoes in oracular centres will never be discovered.

Given this background, the sheer number of oracles known to be focused on caves is no less than astonishing. Of the four great oracular sanctuaries of Apollo, at Delphi in the Balkan Greece, and at Didyma,

[1] Abae: Her. 1. 46; Soph. *Od. Tyr.* 900; Paus. 10. 35. 2–3; Gryneum: Strabo 13. 3. 5; Paus. 1. 21. 7.

[2] The oracle at Ptoion is discussed in Ch. 2.4. The archaeological exploration of the site started in 1884 and continued with intermissions till 1936, Guillon 1943: 10.

Claros, and Patara in Asia Minor, two, those at Delphi and at Claros, were based on inspiration which the prophetic priest or priests attained inside a grotto.[3] Of the forty centres marked by V. Rosenberger on his map of the important Greek oracles,[4] natural and artificial grottoes played a crucial role in the vatic practices of eleven (those at Delphi, Lebadeia, Ptoion, Oropus, Aegira, Bura, Olympia, Lycosoura, Delos, Hierapolis, and Claros). With the addition of less famous oracular grottoes, this number increases considerably. Entering caves regularly occurs as a major requirement for a prophetic séance, both in established cults and in the activities of individual seers.

The association of prophecy with caves is reflected in mythology. According to the Orphic theogonies, Zeus was born and learnt his fate from the Night in its gloomy cave, the abode of Phanes the demiurge.[5] Thus, the cavern from which the creation started was the place where the primordial prophecy was given. To comprehend the reasons which impelled the Greeks to associate divination with caves and grottoes, we need to examine textual and archaeological evidence on oracular shrines and reassess the nature of their cults. The style and content of the discussion are affected by the uneven distribution of extant testimonies on various oracles. Cases on which evidence is meagre are viewed as parts of broader phenomena, an approach that enables comparisons between similar situations and conjectural reconstructions of missing details. Fortunately, in some instances the evidence at our disposal allows us to make assumptions concerning the mental set-up of people attaining prophetic visions in caves and underground chambers. Juxtaposed with the observations expounded in Chapter 1, these insights provide some keys to the Greek predilection for caves in their quest of divine wisdom.

[3] The temple of Apollo at Didyma featured two dark winding stairwells called in the inscriptions 'labyrinths'. Their ceiling was decorated with carefully designed meanders. The exact function of these passages is unclear, but they undoubtedly had a ritual use. It can only be conjectured that the labyrinths of Didyma served the same purposes as the underground corridors of Claros (Montegu 1976; Lehmann 1969: i. 196).

[4] Rosenberger 2001: 214–15.

[5] Kern 1922: fr. 97, 104, 105; West 1983: 71–2, 213–14. See also below, Ch. 5.2.

1. CAVES OF THE NYMPHS AND PAN

Caves were sacred to the Nymphs, youthful and mischievous residents of water-springs, rivers, mountains, and groves.[6] Pan, the god of wild nature, dwelt in caves, and was often worshipped in conjunction with the Nymphs.[7] On Attic objects of art, Pan and the Nymphs are recurrently portrayed together inside caves, starting from the fifth century.[8] Dozens of caves sacred to the Nymphs and to Pan are known today.[9] The archaeological finds in most of them tend to be uniform and usually comprise rock inscriptions, relief representations of the Nymphs, Pan, and other deities, such as Hermes, Dionysus, and the satyrs, as well as terracotta statuettes, lamps, various kinds of pottery, and coins.[10] During the Classical age, among caves sacred to gods or connected with shrines, caves of Pan and the Nymphs stand out both in terms of numbers and in the amount of evidence they yield.[11] Of the caves associated with cults of the Nymphs, two—a grotto on Ithaca and the Corycian cave—have yielded evidence of cult activities during the Geometric period.[12] Many other cave Nymphaea preserve traces of a sixth-century cult.[13] In most cases the natural form of the caves was not altered, but for minor embellishments, such as erection of votive reliefs or rock inscriptions in niches.[14]

[6] Porph., *De antro* 6, 8; Edwards 1985: 11–19.

[7] Borgeaud 1988: 49; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 235.

[8] Fifth-cent. vase: Beazley 1963: 2, 1452; 5th-cent. relief dedication: *IG* ii^2 4545, Edwards 1985: no. 1; 4th-cent. reliefs, with or without written dedications, *IG* ii^2 4647, 4651–3, 4832; Edwards 1985: nos. 11, 14, 15, 16, 22, 23, 26, 28, 38, 40, 43–5, 51–9; cf. Borgeaud 1988: 140, 160; Lavagne 1988: 76–8; Hausmann 1961: 61; Parker 1996: 163–8.

[9] Amandry 1984: 404–9; Faure 1964: 141–2, 149–50; Edwards 1985: 19–27; Borgeaud 1988: 48–9, 151–4, 207; Lavagne 1988: 60–2; Larson 2001: 226–58; Herter 1937; Brommer 1956: 992–1007.

[10] Amandry 1984: 404–10; Borgeaud 1988: 158; Edwards 1985: nos. 16, 20–6, 29, 33, 36, 37, 40, 51, 83; Lavagne 1988: 73–80; Wickens 1986: i. 171–2; Larson 2001: 230–1.

[11] For instance, in Attica, 9 of 13 to 19 caves regarded today as sacred were parts of shrines of Pan and/or the Nymphs, Wickens 1986: i. 169.

[12] Benton 1938–9: 32, fig. 20; Benton 1934–5: 51–5; cf. Amandry 1984: 396. On the cult at the Polis cave on Ithaca: de Polignac 1994: 11; Malkin 1998: 94–119; Larson 2001: 232.

[13] The caves at Pharsalos, on Leucas, on Siphnos, Lera on Crete, Caruso near Episephyrian Locri, and Kavala in Macedonia, Larson 2001: 249, 251.

[14] See Wickens 1986: 174 for Attica.

Pan is proverbial as a god who deranges mortals, instilling in them panic (*panika deimata*)—terror, confusion, or excitement.[15] Panic fear usually lacks definite causes: an unexplained ambiguity triggers hallucinations, making victims of panic imagine non-existing horrors.[16] Photius puts it bluntly: 'Pan is the source of visions.'[17] Panic is contagious and may affect crowds, but its roots are in the individual's surrender to the grip of mysterious awe. The reason for the association of the god of savage nature with madness is rather apparent: withdrawal to the wilderness and isolation from society disturbs the human mind and incites irrational fears.[18] Loneliness leads to insanity, and Pan's terror, individual or collective, epitomizes this association.

Pan is also able to seize or invade human beings, making them panoleptic, possessed by the god.[19] Panolepsy brings about divine inspiration, which confers mantic abilities. Both panic and panolepsy are numinous, both are indicative of the god's presence, but in different ways.[20] Panic is entirely negative; it paralyses every emotion but fear, while panolepsy, in contrast, like other types of divine possession, is a temporary elevation above the normal human condition. It may be frightening and seem weird, but it inspires hallucinations that have noetic quality.

According to myth, Pan was Apollo's instructor in prophecy.[21] He is usually worshipped in caves together with the Nymphs. In his native Arcadia, Pan, rather than Apollo, was the foremost oracular deity,[22] possessing a cavern on Mt Lycaeum, which was active as an oracle.[23] Another Arcadian oracle of the same god was located in Lycosoura 'in the days of old', where his prophetess was a Nymph, Erato. By the second century AD the oracle had ceased to give responses, but Pan

[15] Borgeaud 1988: 88–116; for the term see p. 229.
[16] Borgeaud 1988: 89, with references.
[17] S.v. *Panos skotos*; Borgeaud 1988: 102, 222.
[18] Borgeaud 1988: 146–7; Lavagne 1988: 66.
[19] Eurip. *Hipp.* 141–50; *Med.* 1167–77; Borgeaud 1988: 103. The word *panolêptos* is very rare: ibid. 107.
[20] Ibid. 113.
[21] Apollod. 1. 4. 1. For the connection between Pan and Apollo, see Schörner and Goette 2004: 115–16.
[22] Dion. Halic. 1. 32; Borgeaud 1988: 3, 47; Jost 1985: 491.
[23] Porph. *De antro* 20, Schol. *in Theocr. Idyll.* 1. 123. Jost 1985: 180, 183, 474–5; Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: iii. 383.

was still worshipped, and an inscription *Panos*, 'of Pan', was discovered in a cavern near Lycosoura.[24]

The scenery of Menander's *The Bad-Tempered Man (Dyscolus)* is the Parnes cave in Attica, sacred to Pan and the Nymphs, where a character in the play pretends to vaticinate instead of Pan.[25] The cave, 70 m deep, has been excavated, and yielded abundant material, Classical to late Roman, including relief representations of the Nymphs, a terracotta figurine of Pan, inscriptions, and other artefacts.[26] Menander's comedy suggests that Pan's prophecy was delivered in the form of an utterance inspired by the god.

Prophetic inspiration and poetic rapture, as well as other kinds of madness (*mania*), were ascribed to nympholepsy, possession by the Nymphs.[27] Bakis, a famous Boeotian prophet (*chrêsmologos*), was considered a nympholept.[28] A sage and a prophet, Melesagoras of Eleusis claimed that he acquired his talents 'because the Nymphs seized him'.[29] Socrates asserts that, if seized by the Nymphs, he, like these mythical or semi-mythical figures would abandon prose speech for dithyrambs.[30] Callimachus' epigram portrays a goat-shepherd who became sacred after a Nymph had possessed him.[31] In the cave of the Sphragidian Nymphs on Mt Cithaeron many local inhabitants became nympholepts, possessed and endowed with oracular powers. The Sphragidian cave itself was once an oracular shrine, where predictions were given by the Nymphs.[32]

Pan and the Nymphs share the same savage environment, hence personify the idea of separation from human culture. Withdrawal

[24] Paus. 8. 37. 11; Jost 1985: 459.

[25] Verses 571–2; Gomme and Sandbach 1973: 134, 223; Lavagne 1988: 70–2.

[26] Wrede 1924: 155; Larson 2001: 245–6; cf. Wickens 1986: i. 182–3, ii. 245–69.

[27] Plato, *Phaedr.* 238CD; Pollux 1. 19; Hesych. s.v. *numpholêptoi;* Iamb. *De myst.* 3. 10; Borgeaud 1988: 106.

[28] Paus. 4. 27. 4, 10. 12. 11. On Bakis see also Her. 8. 20, 77, 96; 9. 43; Paus. 9. 17. 5, 10. 32. 8; Aristoph. *Pax* 1071 with scholia; *Aves* 962. Beginning with Aristotle (*Problemata* 954A), ancient authors talk about multiple Bakides (Plut. *De Pyth. Or.* 399A; Schol. in Arist. *Equites* 123). The multiplicity of Bakides could have been influenced by the multiplicity of Sibyls (Aune 1983: 38; Parke 1988: 180; Connor 1988: 161; Rohde 1925: 314; Dillery 2005: 180).

[29] Max. Tyr. *Diss.* 38. 3; Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: ii. 104; Connor 1988: 160.

[30] Plato *Phaedr.* 238C–241E; Motte 1963.

[31] *Hêrpase numphêi, Anth. Pal.* 7. 518.

[32] Plut. *Arist.* 11; Paus. 9. 3. 9.

from society results in hallucinations and visions which impel people to prophecy. Isolation from the world becomes almost total inside large caves, which consequently often serve as environments inducing altered states of consciousness. To translate this idea into Greek notions: alone in the wilderness, which is the domain of Pan and the Nymphs, and an unnatural environment for the human beings who are born to live in the society of other men, people are exposed to seizures by these deities, and become nympholepts and panolepts. Possession by the gods brings about divine madness, bestowing the gift of superhuman knowledge and vatic abilities. Raptures by Pan or the Nymphs frequently occur in caves, therefore many caverns and grottoes are sacred to them.

Prophetic powers of the Nymphs and their mythology

It is not unusual for a Nymph to be endowed with vatic powers.[33] According to Pausanias, a Parnassian Nymph whose name was Daphnis (laurel) was the first prophetess of Gaia's oracle at Delphi.[34] Calypso the Nymph, who kept Odysseus in her cave for seven years, prophesied to him.[35] A Nymph was the mother of the Erythraean Sibyl, who was buried in a grotto sacred to the Nymphs.[36] For Dionysius of Halicarnassus, the Erythraean Sibyl herself was 'the local oracle-singing Nymph'.[37] Besides the Sibyl, myths attribute Nymph mothers to a number of prominent prophetic personages, both legendary and quasi-historical, such as Mopsus son of Ampyx, Idmon, Tiresias, and Epimenides.[38]

The most ancient and perhaps the most noteworthy piece of evidence on the prophetic powers of the Nymphs is a passage in the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes*, where Apollo is said to have ceded to Hermes an oracle, belonging to three winged virgins.[39] From these

[33] Herter 1937: 1552–3; Larson 2001: 11–20; *contra*: Nilsson 1961–7: i. 249.

[34] Paus. 10. 5. 5.

[35] Hom. *Od.* 5. 206. Calypso 'was very much like a Sibyl' in the opinion of Knight 1967: 164–6.

[36] Paus. 10. 12. 3–6; see Ch. 3.1 below. For the cult of the Nymphs in conjunction with the Sibyl in the city of Erythrae, see Alexandre 1856: 21; Reinach 1891.

[37] *Sibulla epichôria Numphê chrêsmôdos:* Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1. 55. 4.

[38] Hyg. *Fab.* 14; Apollod. 3. 6. 7; Plut. *Solon* 12.

[39] Verses 550–67; Scheiberg 1979; Larson 1995; 2001: 12.

august teachers of divination the great oracular god Apollo learns the mantic art, when still a boy. They live on Mt Parnassus and fly in search of honey: as soon as they eat honeycomb, they are filled with prophetic enthusiasm and start telling the truth. When deprived of the divine food, they give untruthful responses.[40] The three prophetic maidens were most probably the Parnassian Nymphs, who resided in the Corycian cave.[41]

Apollo and Hermes are associated with the Nymphs, usually pictured as a triad, in mythology, art, and in cult. Votive reliefs discovered in various places portray the Nymphs together with them.[42] Apollo was named Nymphagetes, the leader of the Nymphs, in an inscription discovered in the Corycian cave, while Hermes is associated with the Nymphs in another inscription from this cave.[43] Much later, in the second century AD, in the dedications preceding lists of dice oracles from Lycia, Pisidia, and Cilicia, Hermes appears as the patron of astragalomancy, either alone or in conjunction with Apollo and the Muses.[44]

The three virgins of the Parnassus need honey to prophesy. Myths testify abundantly to the association of bees with Apollo and divination.[45] In Delphi, *pêlanos*, a small cake made of flour and honey, had to be offered to the god in order to acquire the right to ask his advice.[46] Apollo's second temple was built of wax,[47] and the Pythia

[40] From the maidens' habit of powdering their hair with flour, most scholars deduce that they were old. Fontenrose 1974: 428 maintains that nothing suggests their old age, and the use of flour was ritual. Could not the white powder on the Nymphs' heads indicate pollen, another hint at their identification with bees?

[41] Halliday 1913: 211; Dietrich 1978: 6; Amandry 1984: 411; Fontenrose 1974: 427; Larson 1995.

[42] From Delphi: with Apollo and Hermes, Amandry 1984: 399, fig. 1. From Attica: with Apollo, Edwards 1985: nos. 3, 14, 63; with Hermes, Weller 1903; Edwards 1985: nos. 5, 9, 19, 20, 22–8, 30, 34, 40, 43–54, 63, 68. From Megara, Andros, Rhodos, and Halicarnassus: with Hermes, Edwards 1985: nos. 78, 87, 91, 104. Hermes was worshipped in several Cretan caves: Rutkowski and Nowicki 1996: 83.

[43] Amandry 1984: 399.

[44] Graf 2005: 71–8.

[45] Dietrich 1978: 6; Ustinova 2002: 277; Bonnechere 2003: 230. Cf. Porphyr. *De antro* 15–19 on honey as a purifying agent, and Arist. *Hist. anim.* 1. 1. 488a 16–18 on the divine in the nature of bees.

[46] Amandry 1950: 86–9.

[47] Paus. 10. 5. 9; Sourvinou-Inwood 1991: 196–200.

could be called a bee.[48] Apollo's son Iamus was nourished as a baby on honey, and became a seer 'preeminent among men'.[49] In Lebadeia, a swarm of bees led the Boeotians to the oracular cave of Trophonius, and enquirers descending into Trophonius' cave had to bring with them honey cakes.[50] It is noteworthy that fragments of beehives were discovered in a number of caves in Attica.[51]

In Greece mead is conceived as belonging to the primeval past, before the invention of wine, when it was the only fermented beverage drunk by immortals and mortals; the Indo-European root **medhu-* survived in Greek as *methu*, a poetic word for wine, and its derivatives meaning drunkenness. The Parnassian bee-Nymphs who needed honey (fermented) to enter the prophetic frenzy, seem to belong to a very archaic tradition linking divination to consumption of a sacred intoxicating drink.[52]

Poetry belongs to the same realm as prophecy, both are under Apollo's patronage, and vatic utterings are often rendered in verse. No wonder that honey was also a symbol of poetic vocation. Poets represent themselves and other poets as bees.[53] Pindar describes his song as 'a bee rushing from story to story'.[54] Words flow like honey from the mouth of the poet inspired by the Muses, and the lips of the poet attract bees: a sixth-century epic poet pictures a bee wandering about on a bronze statue of Homer, lifting a honeycomb into his divine mouth.[55] Similar stories were told of Sophocles, Plato, Virgil, Lucan, and Ambrose.[56]

[48] Pind. *Pyth.* 4. 60.

[49] Pind. *Ol.* 6. 46–50.

[50] Paus. 9. 40. 1; 9. 39. 11; Aristoph. *Nub.* 506–8; Lucian, *Dial. Mort.* 3; Philostr. *Vita Apoll.* 8. 19; cf. Bonnechere 2003: 230.

[51] Wickens 1986: i. 193–4.

[52] Scheiberg 1979: 17–19.

[53] Ibid. 24, with references.

[54] *Pyth.* 10. 45. *The Life of Pindar* (2) cites an anecdote: when the great poet was a boy, he fell asleep on Mt Helicon, in the place where the Muses initiated Hesiod into the art of poetry (*Theog.* 22; Lefkowitz 1981: ii. 59). As Pindar slept, a bee landed on his mouth and built a honeycomb there (*Anth. Pal.* 2. 385–7). Other biographers recount Pindar's dreams about the honeycomb (Lefkowitz 1981: 59).

[55] Hes. *Theog.* 85; *Ant. Pal.* 2. 342–3; Lefkowitz 1981: 24.

[56] Cook 1895: 8 with references. In Theocritus (*Idyll.* 7. 78) the bees feed honey to the shepherd-poet Comatas. See also below, Ch. 3.2.

Cave Nymphaea and nympholepsy

A fascinating case of possession by the Nymphs is attested to by an inscription from the cave at Vari in Attica:[57] Archedamus of Thera, who dedicated several ex-votos at the cave, calls himself *numpholêptos* in one of them.[58] Archedamus received instructions (*phradeis*) from the Nymphs, which means that he had the power to communicate with the immortals. Pan, Apollo, and the Charites (or actually one Charis) were worshipped in the cave alongside the Nymphs, as rock reliefs and inscriptions testify.[59]

According to the inscriptions, Archedamus embellished the cave and planted a garden near its entrance. He even carved self-portraits there: crude low reliefs of a man holding stone-working tools appear twice near inscriptions mentioning his name. Daylight scarcely penetrates this deep cave.[60] The interior of its three chambers makes a very strong impression, enhanced by the stalactites, the water source, and the sound of water dripping through the rock into the cave in rainy weather. The spring is reminiscent of the important role of water in prophecy.[61] The inner part of the cave, separated by a massive rock as well as by a man-made threshold, is dominated by a rudely cut and mutilated enthroned figure, as well as by an oval object, both hewn out of the rock. These are most probably representations of a Nymph and of an *omphalos*.[62] The omphalos is a recognized symbol of the oracular centre at Delphi, and designates the prophetic function of Archedamus' cave. *Omphaloi* are found in

[57] The most recent and complete publication of the site: Schörner and Goette 2004.

[58] *IG* i[3] 977–80; *numpholêptos*: *IG* i[3] 980; Schörner and Goette 2004: 42–59, 123–5. Archedamus' ethnic, *Thêraios,* seems to indicate that he came to Attica from Thera. On Thera, cave cults of Demeter and Zeus were prominent and may have influenced Archedamus' attraction to caves as cult places (Kose 1997: 94–5). J. M. Wickens proposes that Archedamus could originate from Therai in Arcadia, the birthplace of Pan (Wickens 1986: 2: 113).

[59] *IG* i[3] 976, 981; Weller 1903, with plans and figures; Dunham 1903; Edwards 1985: 22; Connor 1988: 166–74, 179–89; Wickens 1986: 90–121.

[60] 21 m deep and 23 m wide, Weller 1903: pls. I and II; Wickens 1986: 2: 90–1; Schörner and Goette 2004: pls. 4–7.

[61] See Ch. 2. 5 below.

[62] Connor 1988: 186. On mantic symbolism of enthroned deities see Bonnechere 2001: 38–41.

other prophetic caves, for instance at Claros. It is noteworthy that Apollo was worshipped in the cave together with the Nymphs and Pan. Apollo is referred to as *Hersos*, 'of the dew', a unique epithet which relates the god to the cave, water dribbling from its roof almost incessantly.[63]

The exact chronology of the cave sanctuary cannot be established, but the earliest artefacts discovered there are dated to *c.*600, Archedamus was active in the late fifth–early fourth century, and numerous ex-votos attest to a fourth- to second-century cult of the Nymphs and Pan. In the fourth century AD the cave began to be used as a Christian shrine.[64]

The Vari cave, rich in natural and man-made awe-inspiring features, offers a rare opportunity to contemplate the emotions of a believer, and in particular of a nympholept, inside a cave Nymphaeum. Archedamus, who devoted much time and care to the cave, experienced states of trance there, probably on numerous occasions, which he describes as 'seizure by the Nymphs'. In one of these seizures, as his dedication states, he had a vision of the Nymphs instructing him 'to work out' the cave.[65] It is also plausible that Archedamus prophesied for the pilgrims to the shrine.[66]

Archedamus returned to the darkness of the cave, lighted by a torch or a lamp, to worship the Nymphs, engrave his dedications, and to depict himself on the rock. The intentions behind the extraordinary act of self-portraiture can only be surmised, but it could not have been mere mundane self-commemoration. Was it a wish to merge with the walls of the sacred cave? To stay forever together with the Nymphs? To dedicate himself to them? Regrettably, he did not explain.[67]

[63] *IG* i³ 981; Wickens 1986: ii. 115; cf. Farnell 1907: iv. 130. For a detailed discussion see Schörner and Goette 2004: 47–9.

[64] Weller 1903: 284; Connor 1988: 169; Larson 2001: 242–5; Wickens 1986: ii. 100–14. It is speculated that Plato visited this cave, and it provided him with examples of nympholepts (Wickens 1986: 2: 118; Schefer 1996: 292), or even served him as a model for his cavern in the seventh book of the *Republic* (514A–521B, Wright 1906).

[65] *IG* i³ 980.

[66] Connor 1988: 184–5; Larson 2001: 16.

[67] There is even less evidence on other dedicants, whose social standing appears to range from slaves to resident aliens; only one dedicant, Euclis of Halae, a deme 3–4 km away from the cave, was an Athenian citizen (Wickens 1986: ii. 103, 116, with references).

We can speculate how the altered state of consciousness described by Archedamus as nympholepsy was reached. A stay in the darkness and silence of the cave was perhaps sufficient; if a person entered it with some faint source of light, the powerful figure of the seated Nymph, stalactites, and other natural features, could inspire fantastic visions. Water from the spring could also be used, either for drinking or for purifications before the sojourn in the cavern. Mental images passing through the mind during such a sojourn could readily be interpreted as prophetic revelations. In the words of W. R. Connor,

> Behind the identity reflected in the cave . . . we have been able to detect a cryptic, incomplete, but powerful sequence—a reenactment of a process of withdrawal from society, cultivation of the wild, confrontation with the strange powers represented in the Nymph, a restructuring of personality and, perhaps, an eventual partial reintegration into a community.[68]

Similar to the case of Archedamus is that of Pantalkes, whose name is mentioned in two fourth-century inscriptions in a cave near Pharsalus in Thessaly.[69] Since the Archaic period, the cave had been sacred to the Nymphs.[70] In contrast to Archedamus and other nympholepts, Pantalkes says that he received his wisdom and poetic talent from Chiron, whereas the Nymphs made him 'a good man', and Pan gave him laughter—a hint at Pantalkes' hilarious panolepsy.[71] Pantalkes was devoted to the care of his cave exactly like Archedamus: for years, he tended plants and looked after other parts of the precinct.[72]

A cave Nymphaeum near Kafizin in Cyprus yielded hundreds of sherds with dedications inscribed in Greek and in the local script.[73] Most dedications were inscribed in the late third century by Onesagoras, who

[68] Connor 1988: 189.

[69] *SEG* 1. 247; 248; 2. 357; cf. *SEG* 3. 476; 16. 377, 378; Decourt 1995: 88–94, nos. 72–3; Connor 1988: 162–3; Larson 2001: 18–20.

[70] Larson 2001: 238. Pantalkes' inscriptions mention also Pan, Hermes, Apollo, Heracles, Chiron, Asclepius, and Hygieia, each of them having bestowed upon him various gifts. J.-C. Decourt draws attention to the connections of these deities to Thessaly and their association with medicine and caves (Decourt 1995: 93). Pantalkes' cave was not unique: another Thessalian cave of the Nymphs yielded several inscriptions, Wace and Thomson 1908–9.

[71] *SEG* 1. 248. Pantalkes' panolepsy and nympholepsy: Bonnechere 2001: 37.

[72] Bonnechere 2001: 34–37.

[73] Mitford 1980; Masson 1981; *SEG* 30. 1608.

worshipped a single Nymph, rather than a plurality,[74] and addressed her as his sister or daughter. Onesagoras practised some sort of divination, as appears to be implied by the strange word *manziarchêsas* meaning 'having performed the role of *mantiarchos*'.[75] He does not explicitly ascribe his vatic abilities to nympholepsy, but the intensity and intimacy of his connection to the Nymph point towards this correlation.[76] In contrast to the caves of Archedamus and Pantalkes, which were visited by worshippers before and after these two nympholepts, the cult in Onesagoras' cave died away after his demise:[77] another expression of the exceptionally personal contact between the nympholept, his Nymph, and the place where he met up with her phantom. Similar devotion is reflected in a third-century AD epitaph from Cos, where a man calls himself 'servant of the Nymphs'.[78]

These cases suggest a remarkably constant pattern which includes, first, a cave as the *mise-en-scène*,[79] second, possession by the Nymphs or at least their cult, and third, endowment of chosen devotees with inspired visions, vatic, or poetic abilities.[80] While the cult of the Nymphs is entirely private and modest, the number of ex-votos and dedications discovered in the caves is impressive. The emergence of a special term, *numpholêptos*, implies that nympholepsy was a frequent phenomenon. The mythology and the cultic practice reflect the association of nympholepsy with caverns. There, in the dark silence, only occasionally interrupted by a rustle or a flicker, the withdrawal from the distractions of the outer world was almost total, and altered states of consciousness developed in more than a few individuals. Since most caves were sacred to Pan and the Nymphs, these deities were deemed responsible for the state of trance, and they appeared in the visions rising in the minds of believers.

[74] J. and L. Robert, *Bull.* 10 (1981–4), no. 636; Larson 2001: 257.

[75] Mitford 1980: no. 258; J. and L. Robert, *Bull.* 10 (1981–4), no. 636; Masson 1981: 641; Connor 1988: 164. On *mantiarchos* on Cyprus see: Masson 1966: 20–1; Robert 1978; Georgoudi 1998: 344.

[76] Connor 1988: 164.

[77] Larson 2001: 18.

[78] *Latris numphôn,* Larson 2001: 18.

[79] Often with an adjacent grove or garden, as in Vari and at Pharsalus. For sacred groves in Greece and their association with mantic rituals, see Bonnechere 2001, 2007.

[80] On the association of these two talents, see Ch. 3.2.

Cave Nymphaea and divination by lots

The formidable Corycian cave, with its grove of stalactites and stalagmites, is located high above Delphi, about 18 km north of the sanctuary. Its main chamber is about 60 m deep, and from 6 to 12 m high.[81] Water drips from the roof of the cave, while from its mouth a magnificent view of the plain still opens up before the eyes of modern tourists, who are impressed by the cavern no less than was Pausanias.[82] The cave was named after a Nymph called Coryca, Apollo's beloved and the mother of his son,[83] and sacred to the Nymphs and to Pan. The Nymphs of the Corycian cave are also mentioned by fifth-century dramatists and by later authors.[84] In Aristonoos' fourth-century paean, they offer their cave to Apollo as a gift.[85]

The site has been excavated,[86] and the findings suggest that the cult of the Nymphs dominated and predated that of Pan, whose presence in the Corycian cave is first attested to by fourth-century dedications.[87] The Nymphs however remained dominant: an inscription on the rock at the entrance to the cave addresses them only.[88] During the Classical period, when the Corycian Nymphs were consistently associated with Apollo, the cave was perhaps an annex to the sanctuary at Delphi, but intended for humbler people who left numerous but cheap offerings.[89] The Corycian cave ceased to attract pilgrims by the second century AD.[90] Most offerings were discovered broken, perhaps intentionally.[91] The finds at the bottom of the cave are much less dense than at its entrance, although the lamps discovered inside indicate that visitors penetrated the cave.

[81] Frazer 1898: comm. to Paus. 10. 32. 2.

[82] Paus. 10. 32. 2–7.

[83] Paus. 10. 6. 3.

[84] Aesch. *Eumen.* 22; Soph. *Antig.* 1127; Strabo 9. 3. 1.

[85] *IDelph.* III. 2. 191; Furley and Bremer 2001: i. 119–35; ii. 45–52.

[86] The results are published in Supplements 7 and 9 to *BCH* (1981 and 1984). The cultic function of the Corycian cave is probable during the Neolithic and the Mycenaean periods, and can be confidently established from the 7th cent., when abundant offerings of various kinds were left in the cave (Amandry 1984: 395–7).

[87] Amandry 1984: 398.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Such as relief plaques, terracotta statuettes, pottery, coins, and several hundred finger rings: ibid. 401; Larson 1995: 348.

[90] Amandry 1984: 401.

[91] Ibid. 421.

At least one case of inspiration by the Nymphs is confirmed with regard to the Corycian cave. An inscription discovered there was left by a woman who 'heard the Nymphs and Pan',[92] that is, experienced auditory hallucinations. Other cases of nympholepsy probably occurred without any documentary evidence being left. The great Corycian cave yielded some twenty thousand astragals (knuckle-bones of goats and sheep).[93] They were most probably discarded after use as lots: other lot oracles are known, and divination by lot (cleromancy) existed in Delphi.[94] A number of astragals were also discovered in the Pitsa (Saftulis) cave near Sicyon, famous for its well-preserved Archaic painted tablets consecrated to the Nymphs.[95] Constant association with Apollo, numerous astragals used as lots, and vatic abilities ascribed to the Nymphs all suggest that the Corycian cave served as a seat of a lot oracle. Less famous caves sacred to the Nymphs, such as that at Pitsa, are also likely to have been used for cleromancy.

From an account by the fourth-century historian Philochorus we know that the Thriai were three Nymphs, inhabiting Parnassus, the nurses of Apollo—a description which perfectly fits the august maidens of the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes*. Mantic lots were called *thriai* after them and prophesying, *thriasthai*.[96] Callimachus mentions *thriai* and *manteis* as part of Apollo's realm.[97] The three Nymphs were said to have invented *thriai* and to be the first prophets (*manteis*).[98] In the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* the bee maidens practise their soothsaying *apaneuthe*, 'apart', most likely from Apollo and Delphi, and are therefore separated from the adult god in his capacity as the lord of Pytho.[99] Indeed, the prophetic bee maidens did not need to dwell in Delphi: as Thriai, they lived elsewhere on Parnassus, and the Corycian cave is the most fitting home for them.[100]

[92] *SEG* 3. 406: *Numphôn [kai]Panos kluousa.*

[93] Amandry 1984: 410.

[94] Parke and Wormell 1956: i. 18; Rosenberger 2001: 56; Larson 2001: 235. On cleromancy: Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: i. 189–97; Grottanelli 2005; on the oracle at Bura see Ch. 2.2 below.

[95] Amandry 1984: 410; Larson 1995: 347.

[96] *FGH* 328 F195. The earliest mention of the Thriai is by Pherecydes: *FGH* 3 F49.

[97] *H. Ap.* 45.

[98] Steph. Byz. s.v. *Thria*; Hesychios s.v. *thriai*; Halliday 1913: 210; Fontenrose 1974: 428; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 171.

[99] Scheiberg 1979: 10.

[100] Scheiberg (ibid.) is reluctant to admit this role of the bee maidens, and regards them exclusively as inspirers of poetry and prophecy.

Yet the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* depicts the three sisters speaking the truth, which would imply inspired divination (*manteia*), rather than less valued technical skill of cleromancy. A Greek proverb which says, 'Many are lot-throwers (*thrioboloi*), prophets (*manteis*) are few',[101] may indicate the reason for the change. Initially, the Thriai were deemed to act like other Nymphs, seizing people and inspiring them to utter prophecies. Eventually, the growing popularity of the cave, together with its proximity to Delphi, caused changes in the prophetic procedure, entailing the development of the legend of the mantic Parnassian Nymphs, who became the inventors of divinatory lots.[102]

Thus, in the absence of required numbers of inspired prophets, who could enter the state of possession by the Nymphs (nympholepts), the numerous visitors who left thousands of modest offerings in the Corycian and other caves had to content themselves with cleromancy, the less venerable technique of prediction.[103] The contrast between the single inscription attesting to nympholepsy and the mass of knuckle-bones indicates that few visitors were seized by the Nymphs in comparison to the great majority who were able to use the lot alone. The place of divination remained the same, although the practice of lot-throwing did not require a state of trance. The environment which once was crucial for the performance of prophetic activities, partially forfeited its functional importance, and preserved its cultic role mostly as an element of the tradition.

To recapitulate: it is almost self-evident that Pan and the Nymphs, unrefined deities of nature, would be worshipped in the wild, in their pristine abodes.[104] It is also only to be expected that men born and bred to live in human society, when separated from it in an untamed landscape, would feel a spectrum of emotions from fear to bucolic delight, and would ascribe these sensations to the gods of the countryside. No commonsensical explanation can clarify why a stay in a

[101] Steph. Byz. s.v. *Thria*. [102] *Etym. Magn.* 455. 34.

[103] If this was so, the shift from inspired prophecy to cleromancy in the oracles of the Nymphs developed in parallel to a similar process at Delphi, where in the 4th cent. the casting of lots apparently became a common method of oracle-giving (Amandry 1950: 25–36; Parke and Wormell 1956: i. 18; Whittaker 1965: 27; Grottanelli 2005: 130; with some reservations Maurizio 1995: 80).

[104] Cf. Wickens 1986: i. 193 on the role of caves in the seasonal movements of shepherds with their flocks.

cave supposedly belonging to Pan and the Nymphs would cause people to hallucinate and utter prophecies. However, if the effects of isolation and sensory deprivation are considered, panolepsy and nympholepsy become less mysterious: they ensued from a normal reaction of the human mind to these conditions. Altered states of consciousness may resemble inebriation, which explains why the prophetic Nymphs were so intimately associated with honey, a symbol of intoxication. The cave itself became in some cases just an emblem of divinely enthused prophecy: in several popular centres of divination the emphasis shifted from inspired vaticination to lot oracles, which even then retained the patronage of the Nymphs. Many less frequented caves preserved their reputation as places of nympholepsy or panolepsy.

2. ENTRANCES TO THE NETHERWORLD

Caves, dark and menacing, seemed bottomless to people who did not dare to penetrate their damp depths. Unsurprisingly, they invited the image of the netherworld, were often considered entrances to Hades, and called Charonia or Plutonia,[105] after Charon the ferryman of the dead and Pluto the lord of the netherworld. The idea that caves served as passages to the netherworld was so common that even relatively unimposing grottoes could be given the title of Plutonium. Many of these caverns were used for divination.

Oracles of the dead

Oracles of the dead were usually placed at the entrances to the netherworld. In the fifth century they were called *nekuomanteia* (prophecy-places of the dead); later other terms, such as *psuchagôgion* (drawing-place of ghosts) and *psuchomanteion* (prophecy-place

[105] Gruppe 1906: 815 lists the following places: Acharaca, Argos Hippoboton (?), Ephyra in Thesprotia, Heracleia Pontica, Hermione, Hierapolis in Phrygia, Cumae in Italy, Phigalia, Taenarum, Thymbria between Magnesia and Myus, and Troizen. Cf. Ogden 2001: 25–6. On Pluton's grotto at Eleusis see below, Ch. 5.2.

of ghosts), came into use.[106] More often than not, they were located in caves: out of the 'big four' named by D. Ogden,[107] the oracles at Taenarum and at Heracleia Pontica were based in caves, and the one at Avernus near Cumae was intrinsically associated with caves.[108]

The mythology of many oracles of the dead was profoundly influenced by the long description of necromancy known as *Nekuia* in the eleventh song of the *Odyssey*. Following the instruction of Circe, Odysseus arrives at a land where the rivers Pyriphlegethon and Cocytus, a branch of the ominous Styx, flow into the Acheron.[109] This gloomy place belonged to the mythical Cimmerians or Cheimerians, who lived in eternal mist, never seen by the sun.[110] Odysseus pours libations into a cubit-deep pit, prays to the shades of the dead, slaughters a black sheep and a ram for them, and allows first the soul of the seer Tiresias, and then other shades to drink the hot blood and disclose to him knowledge hidden from the mortals. This gruesome account shaped the attitude of the Greeks to necromancy and their ideas on the functioning of the oracles of the dead.

Taenarum

The promontory of Taenarum, at the Peloponnesus' southern extremity, is an unsurprising location for a sanctuary of Poseidon. The particular feature of this sanctuary was that it comprised a cave and a temple,[111] or 'a temple like a cave';[112] in popular belief the cave was a gate to the netherworld, through which Heracles brought Cerberus from Hades. Over the last two centuries, the site has been studied by several researchers. The cave is about 15 m deep and 10–12 m wide, most of it exposed to the open air. At its mouth, there are cuttings in the bedrock, intended to hold inscriptions. Immediately adjacent to the cave are remains of a rectangular construction, which apparently

[106] Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: i. 330; Ogden 2001: 17.

[107] Ogden 2001.

[108] The cave of the Black Demeter in Phigalia (Paus. 8. 42. 1, 2, 11–13) is not called Charonion, but *psuchagôgoi* were active there in the 5th cent. BC (Paus. 3. 17. 9).

[109] *Od.* 10. 504–15.

[110] On the Cimmerians see below.

[111] Strabo 8. 5. 1; Pomp. Mela 2. 51.

[112] *Naos eikasmenos spêlaiôi*, Paus. 3. 25. 4.

created the impression of a temple. Above this complex, there was another small temple of Poseidon.[113]

The cult at Taenarum included divination. Those gazing into a spring at Taenarum once were said to see harbours and ships there.[114] A myth recounts that Poseidon, who had owned Delphi jointly with Gaia, received Taenarum from Apollo in exchange for his share in Pytho.[115] This barter implies compatible values and functions of the two sanctuaries.

The Taenarum sanctuary was indeed important: it possessed a prominent oracle of the dead.[116] This feature of the sanctuary explains the location of the gate of Hades in the Taenarum cave. Plutarch recounts the foundation of the 'sending-place of ghosts' (*psuchopompeion*) at Taenarum by a Cretan named Tettix ('Cricket').[117] In Greek lore, the cricket is earth-born, bloodless as a ghost, wise and dear to Apollo and the Muses, therefore Cricket was an ideal initiator of a ghost-oracle.[118]

Hesychius explains that in Laconia *nekromanteion* is called *nekuorion*, deriving from *horaô*, 'to see'.[119] It is suggested that consultation at the oracle of the dead was by means of incubation: the enquirers slept in the sanctuary in order to see the dead in their dreams.[120] However, there are no indications about the exact method used at Taenarum to see the dead. Visions could be attained by people not necessarily asleep, as the examples of panolepts, nympholepts, and consulters at the Trophonium demonstrate.

A curious story about the man who killed Archilochus, a famous seventh-century poet, in battle provides both a *terminus ante quem* for the foundation of the oracle, and a rare insight into the way the oracles worked.[121] The poet was killed in an honest combat by Calondas, nicknamed Corax (crow). This Calondas arrived at Delphi

[113] Cummer 1978.

[114] Paus. 3. 25. 8. At the oracle of Apollo at Kyaneae in Lycia, the enquirer who gazed into the sacred pool could see 'everything he wished to behold', Paus. 7. 21. 13; cf. Bryce 1996: 47.

[115] Ephorus *FGH* 70 F 150; Strabo 8. 6. 14.

[116] Ogden 2001: 34–42.

[117] Plut. *Mor.* 560E; cf. Hesychius, s.v. *Tettigos hedranon.*

[118] Ogden 2001: 38.

[119] S.v. *nekuorion*; Ogden 2001: 37.

[120] Ogden 2001: 38.

[121] Suda s.v. *Archilochos.*

as an enquirer, and the Pythia sent him away as polluted: Apollo did not forgive the destroyer of the talented poet. When Calondas cursed his fate and the fact that he had not chosen to be killed rather than kill, the god had pity on him, and advised him to go to Taenarum, where Tettix was buried, and placate Archilochus' soul with libations. Calondas did as he was told, and received the god's forgiveness.[122]

Thus, the oracle of the dead at Taenarum was active from the seventh century BC till at least the late first century AD, when Plutarch referred to it. It was located in the cave on the seashore, which was regarded as a gate to Hades. The method of divination at Taenarum remains unclear.[123]

Heracleia Pontica

In 560, when the Megarians founded their new colony in the land of Maryandini, they found there a large cave, and immediately connected it with the myth of Heracles' descend into the netherworld and his return with Cerberus.[124] To complete the picture of the gate to Hades, the cave was named Acherusian, and a river nearby was called Acheron, a landscape imitation of the place where Odysseus' famous consultation of the dead took place.[125] The oracle at Heracleia was established already by the early fifth century BC, and was still active in the fourth century AD.[126]

[122] Archilochos, like other poets after him, identified himself with a cricket (fr. 223 West), which turns the consultation of his soul at Taenarum into a double consultation of a ghost cricket, both of the Cretan Tettix and of Archilochus (Lefkowitz 1981: 29; Ogden 2001: 38–9).

[123] If one doubts the authenticity of Suda's story, the earliest information on the existence of Poseidon's sanctuary at Taenarum is contained in two references to its activities by Thucydides (1. 128 and 1. 133). Thucydides does not mention the oracle of the dead, but his account of the Taenarum meeting between Pausanias regent of Sparta and his messenger to the Persian king (1. 132–4) is to be juxtaposed with stories of Pausanias' consultations of other *nekromanteioa*, discussed below in this chapter. For the Taenarum sanctuary as an asylum see Schumacher 1993: 72–4. For an analysis of Thucydides' passage on Taenarum see Ogden 2001: 39–40.

[124] Xen. *Anab.* 6. 2. 2; Diod. 14. 31. 3; Pomp. Mela 1. 103; Dion. Perieg. 788–92; Plin. *Hist. Nat.* 6. 4; Strabo 12. 3. 4; Hoepfner 1966: 21.

[125] Amm. Marc. 22. 8. 17; Pomp. Mela 1. 103; Apoll. Rhod. *Arg.* 2. 730; cf. *Od.* 11. 510–15. Ammianus Marcellinus records the local name of the cave, Mychopontion (Sea Nook).

[126] Plut. *Cim.* 6; cf. Paus. 3. 17. 8; Amm. Marc. 22. 8. 16–17; Ogden 2001: 29.

The large cave, with its pool of crystal-clear water, and man-made niches with statues and vases, was described in the third century AD by Quintus Smyrnaeus.[127] In this account the owners of the cavern are the Nymphs and Pan, who were in fact considered the tenants of the majority of caves in Greece. But for this detail, the description is accurate, and allowed a confident identification of the site as the Acherusian cave. The cave is entered by a long and narrow passage, about a metre wide. The main chamber is about 45 m wide and 20 m deep. Most of the floor is flooded by a pool. The niches hewn in the walls probably contained statues and other offerings.[128]

The only account of a consultation at the Acherusian cave is left by Plutarch:[129] Pausanias the regent of Sparta demanded that Cleonike, a maiden of noble birth from Byzantium, be sent to him. Entering Pausanias' bedroom, the girl overturned a lamp. The regent, abruptly awakened, thought that he was being attacked by his enemies, and stabbed the girl to death. Later, haunted by Cleonike's ghost, he came to the *nekuomanteion* at Heracleia, and tried to appease her wrath. She appeared before him, and promised that he would be delivered when in Sparta, apparently meaning that death awaited him there.

The historical accuracy of Plutarch's story is of secondary importance: it was possibly a popular tale reflecting the despotism of Pausanias the regent.[130] The geographer Pausanias retells the same episode, the only difference being that the necromantic séance takes place in Phigalia.[131] The important point is that both authors send the haunted regent to oracles of the dead, and that the existence of such oracles is beyond doubt.

The technique of necromancy used in Heracleia is obscure. We don't know what ceremonies preceded the appearance of the ghost, and whether it appeared in a dream, which would imply that the *nekuomanteion* was based on incubation, or in a vision, which would mean that the enquirers were supposed to enter a kind of trance.

[127] *Posthomerica* 6. 468–91; Ogden 2001: 32–3.

[128] Hoepfner 1966: 21, pl. 3, plan 1; Ogden 2001: 32–3, fig. 5.

[129] *Cim.* 6, cf. *Mor.* 555C; Aristodemus *FGH* 108 F8.

[130] Cf. Ogden 2001: 32.

[131] Paus. 3. 17. 9.

The Acheron in Thesprotia

As early as in Homer's time, a place in Thesprotia known as Cheimerion, where the Rivers Cocytos, Acheron, and Pyriphlegethon flow into the Lake Acheron,[132] was believed to be the entrance to the netherworld. It was in this gloomy place that Odysseus performed his invocation of the dead. Following Odysseus, other mortals were credited with similar exploits: Theseus was said to have descended through the Acherusian plain to Hades, and Lucian's Menippus passed it on his way back from the netherworld.[133]

Pausanias was the first to assume that Odysseus actually visited the oracle of the dead in Thesprotia.[134] In fact, Homer makes no mention of an established oracle: Odysseus learns about the cave at the Acheron from the witch Circe, who also instructs him in the rites to be performed to invocate the dead and make them speak.[135] In any case, the *nekuomanteion* on the Acheron must have been founded at a very early date: it was already famous by 600, when it was consulted by Periander tyrant of Corinth.[136] In Herodotus' account, Periander sent a delegation to 'Thesprotia on the Acheron river' to propitiate his dead wife, and her spirit then appeared before the envoys and spoke to them. Regrettably Herodotus did not take the trouble to give further details of the ceremonies.

At a site broadly matching ancient descriptions of the location of the *nekuomanteion* on the Acheron near Ephyra, S. I. Dakaris excavated a large complex (62 × 46 m) with exceptionally thick walls, surrounding a building which consisted of a central hall and a row of smaller rooms and meandering passages. Below the large hall was a crypt, hewn out of the rock. The building, constructed in the fourth century, must have been destroyed in the second century, presumably after the battle of Pydna in 168. The excavator suggests that the rooms were used by the pilgrims for mental and physical preparation, including seclusion, purifications, and other rituals which had to be performed before the communication with the dead. Several rooms contained vessels with

[132] Thuc. 1. 46; Strabo 7. 7. 5 on the location; Paus. 9. 30. 6 confuses two lakes, Acheron and Avernus. Cf. Clark 1979: 60; Burkert 2005: 36.

[133] Paus. 1. 17. 5; Luc. *Menip.* 7.

[134] Paus. 1. 17. 5; cf. Hardie 1977: 279; Ogden 2001: 43.

[135] *Od.* 10. 487.

[136] Her. 5. 92.

different foodstuffs, including broad beans and lupin seeds, as well as traces of sulphur. S. I. Dakaris observes that, when eaten green, broad beans and lupins cause indigestion and arousal of the senses, to the point of giddiness and hallucinations. The excavations of the central hall yielded wheels, a bronze cauldron, and other metal objects, including catapults and ratchets, interpreted as parts of the machinery used by the priests to produce ghostly apparitions, supposedly illuminated with burning sulphur. Several terracotta figurines of Persephone and Cerberus, fine decorated ware, together with large quantities of jugs and storage vessels and agricultural tools were unearthed in other rooms. In the vicinity of the building, several sixth-century terracotta figurines of Persephone were discovered.[137]

S. I. Dakaris identifies the complex as the famous Acherusian *nekuomanteion* and reconstructs the procedure of its consultation during the Hellenistic period. In this scenario, the consulter was led through the dark winding corridors into the central hall, his consciousness affected by toxic foods and preliminary austerities. Confused, frightened, and disoriented, he faced the sounds and visions produced by the hidden machinery, and his mind readily inflated these pictures into horrible apparitions and awe-inspiring predictions. After a sojourn in the hall, the enquirer proceeded by a different route to a room where he could remain for some time to contemplate his experience. Purifications intended to purge the enquirer of the pollution conveyed by direct contact with the dead probably completed his visit to the sanctuary.

Although no detailed scientific report of the excavations of the *nekuomanteion* has ever been published, S. I. Dakaris's interpretation of the complex at Ephyra is largely accepted.[138] However, the abundant finds of catapults and everyday wares have led D. Baatz to question identification of the building as an oracle centre and to infer that it served as a Hellenistic tower-farm with a cellar.[139] This scepticism is justified.[140] Too many artefacts discovered in the building

[137] Dakaris 1993: 13–27, 1973, 1962.

[138] Lehmann 1969: 1: 196; Clark 1979: 60; Hardie 1977: 280; Borgeaud 1974: 19; Donnadieu and Vilatte 1996: 87; Bremmer 2002: 74–5; Spawforth 2006: 220.

[139] Baatz 1982.

[140] Baatz's criticism of Dakaris's interpretation is supported by Wiseman 1998; Fouache and Quantin 1999; Ogden 2001: 18–21; Bonnechere 2003: 246–7; Curnow 2004: 50; Burkert 2005: 36. V. Rosenberger is also sceptical, although for a different reason: Rosenberger 2001: 129.

do not belong in a cultic context, and furthermore, too many other artefacts, such as graffiti and votive offerings, which one would expect to find at a long-established cultic site, are lacking.[141] Many other important questions remain unanswered, among them how the crypt was connected to the hall above it. The quantities of foodstuffs stored in the building are unparalleled at any other Greek cultic site.

Moreover, in order to explain the presence of dozens of wheels, hammers, and other simple everyday tools in the heart of the assumed cultic complex, S. I. Dakaris interprets the proceedings in the central hall as shameless deception of the consulters by the priests. Actually, the excavator was echoing the logic of Clement of Alexandria, who cites the appliances used at the Acherusian oracle in his anti-pagan polemics: 'Don't bother with godless temples or accesses to subterranean spaces full of jugglery, or the Thesprotian kettle, or the tripod of Cirrha, or the bronzes of Dodona.'[142] What Clement of Alexandria challenged was the genuineness of pagan numinous experiences. However, enquirers firmly convinced of the reality of Hades and Persephone did not need kettle din, illumination with sulphur, or apparitions staged by wheel-operated cranes, to induce hallucinations and phantasms: fasting, purifications, and an awe-inspiring environment were quite sufficient.

Since the complex at Ephyra could hardly have served as the seat of the Acheron oracle, we are left with literary evidence alone. The extant passages never refer explicitly to a cave, and even 'a descent to the dead' in the Thesprotian *nekuomanteion* is mentioned only by Lucius Ampelius, an author who probably lived in the third century AD.[143] D. Ogden therefore suggests that the activities of the *nekuomanteion* were focused on the Acherusian Lake.[144] In the absence of unequivocal evidence, it seems prudent to refrain from assumptions

[141] The excavator maintains that numerous vessels discovered at the site served as ex-votos (Dakaris 1993: 25), but in the absence of inscriptions, this supposition is unconvincing. Entirely unfeasible is Dakaris's interpretation of ploughheads, axes, sickles, and other tools as 'votive offerings related to chthonic worship' (Dakaris 1962: 90). His assumption that animal remains in one of the corridors attest sacrificial burning (Dakaris 1962: 88; 1973: 146) is also untenable, since the Greeks did not burn sacrifices inside closed rooms.

[142] *Protrept.* 2. 1.

[143] L. Ampelius, *Liber memorialis* 83; Ogden 2001: 47.

[144] Ogden 2001: 47–51.

on the setting of the Acheron oracle. Further archaeological investigations in the area of Ephyra may shed light on the mystery of the Thesprotian *nekuomanteion.*

Avernus

Almost every tradition on the *nekuomanteion* at Lake Avernus in Italy is equivocal and confusing. The earliest association of the lake with an oracle of the dead appears in a fragment by Sophocles,[145] and is later mentioned by Strabo, Diodorus, Servius, Maximus of Tyre, and other authors.[146] When the Greeks founded their first colonies in Italy, the new country was the westernmost border of their world, and thus the place closest to the sunset and to the realm of the dead. Lake Avernus immediately stirred the imagination of the Greek settlers: its black motionless waters, the Phlegraean ('fiery') fields surrounding it, with extinct volcanoes, numerous fissures and cracks emitting mephitic vapours, hot springs, as well as natural caverns and man-made grottoes,[147] provided the best possible scenery for Odysseus' descent into Hades. Dio Cassius even records a myth locating Calypso's cave, where Odysseus was kept for seven years, at Lake Avernus.[148] The lake's Italic name Avernus ('plenty of birds') evolved into the Greek Aornos ('birdless'), because birds were said to avoid its mephitic exhalations. Thus, Aornos turned into another Plutonium, similar to the entrances to the netherworld in Asia Minor, deadly to living beings.[149] Odysseus' and Heracles' wanderings were associated with Italy soon after the beginning of the Greek colonization, and Lake Avernus came to be recognized as the site of Odysseus' necromancy and Heracles' ascent from Hades.[150] Odysseus' example inspired Naevius and Virgil to choose Avernus Lake as the gate for Aeneas' descent to the dead.[151]

[145] *TGF* 748; for the analysis see Clark 1979: 65–6.

[146] Strabo 5. 4. 5, Diod. (4. 22), Serv. Comm. ad Verg. *Aen.* 6. 107; Maxim. Tyr. *Diss.* 8. 2; Etym. Magnum, s.v. *Aornos.*

[147] Maiuri 1958; McKay 1972; Paget 1967*b*: 251; *Pagano et al.* 1982: 272.

[148] 48. 50; Knight 1967: 167 connects Calypso with Sibyls.

[149] Strabo 5. 4. 5. For the Plutonia in the valley of Meander, see below.

[150] As was clear to Strabo: 5. 4. 5. Cf. Peterson 1919: 74; Hardie 1969: 32; Clark 1979: 64–8; Ogden 2001: 61–4.

[151] Below in this chapter.

The tradition consistently locates the oracle in an underground cave near the lake. The earliest and the most eloquent depiction of this cave is the tale of the race of Cimmerians in Ephorus' fourth-century description of Italy, which is cited by Strabo:[152]

Again, Ephorus, assigning the locality to the Cimmerians, says: They live in underground houses which they call *argillai* (clay-pits), and it is through tunnels that they visit one another, and also admit strangers to the oracle, which is situated far beneath the earth; and they live on what they get from mining, and from those who consult the oracle, and from the king of the country, who has appointed to them fixed allowances; and those who live about the oracle have an ancestral custom, that no one should see the sun, but should go outside the caverns (*chasmata*) only during the night; and it is for this reason that the poet speaks of them as follows: 'And never does the shining sun look upon them';[153] but later on the Cimmerians were destroyed by a certain king, because the response of the oracle did not turn out well for him; the oracle, however, still endures, although removed to another place. (Translation by H. L. Jones, slightly modified.)

This passage from Ephorus was cited in the early first century by Pseudo-Scymnus. The oracle at Avernus is denoted the 'Cerberian underground oracle',[154] quite unsurprisingly, given the rich tradition connecting Heracles and Cerberus to the Phlegraean fields.[155]

By Strabo's time, troglodyte Cimmerians were known to be a myth, and the oracle, as well as the priests who offered sacrifices and propitiated the underground powers on behalf of those who wished to sail into the lake, belonged to the past. Diodorus, in the first century BC, and Maximus of Tyre, in the second century AD, referred to the oracle as having disappeared some time before.[156] Pliny mentions 'Avernus near which formerly (*quondam*) was the Cimmerian town'.[157] Cicero was obliged to quote an ancient poet when referring to the evocation of the dead at Avernus,[158] since he apparently knew of no more recent authority. He draws a clear distinction between rites known from the mythological tradition and actual cultic practice, which is not connected with this lake.

[152] *FGH* 70 F134a, Strabo 5. 4. 5. [153] Hom. *Od.* 11. 15.
[154] *FGH* 70 F134b: *Kerberion hupochthonion manteion.*
[155] Ogden 2001: 63–6; Clark 1979: 70.
[156] Diod. 4. 22; Max. Tyr. *Diss.* 8. 2.
[157] *Hist. Nat.* 3. 61. [158] *Tusc. Disp.* 1. 16. 37.

The most famous description of the oracular cave at Avernus can be found in Virgil;[159] the Sibyl of Cumae brings Aeneas there, when he seeks to descend to the netherworld: 'A deep cave (*spelunca alta*) there was, yawning wide and vast, shingly, and sheltered by dark lake and woodland gloom, over which no flying creatures could safely wing their way; such a vapour from those black jaws poured into the over-arching heaven' (translated by H. Rushton Fairclough). Notwithstanding its fame in antiquity, the Avernus oracle remains a mystery, and its patron deity is indefinable.[160] There is no account of an actual consultation of this oracle. In 214, Hannibal pretended that he wished to offer sacrifices at Lake Avernus, but the cult remains unspecified.[161] It is noteworthy that in his *Tusculan Conversations,* Cicero, whose villa was located close to Lake Avernus, discusses the evocation of ghosts and quotes an old poet as evidence on this practice, without adding a word about a local tradition on the subject.[162]

The method of consultation is also obscure. The ceremony pictured by Maximus of Tyre[163] draws on Odysseus' proceedings in the eleventh song of the *Odyssey,* and is therefore of little value as a source on the rites of Avernus. Virgil's reference to the Gates of Sleep through which shades or dreams pass[164] implies that the necromantic séance was based on incubation, but poetic fiction can hardly serve as a reliable source.[165]

The prophetic centre was operated, according to two different sources of Strabo, either by priests who 'held the place on lease',[166] or

[159] 6. 237–42.

[160] Peterson 1919: 78–9; Frederiksen 1984: 76; Ogden 2001: 69.

[161] Livy 24. 12. 4; Hardie 1969: 32; Ogden 2001: 69; Clark 1979: 69.

[162] 1. 16. 37; cf. Clark 1979: 69.

[163] *Diss.* 8. 2.

[164] 6. 893–9.

[165] Ogden 2001: 73–4; cf. Austin 1977: 274; Fletcher 1962: 56, 63. It is suggested that the *psuchomanteion* mentioned by Plutarch (*Mor.* 109 BD) in the story of Elysios, a Greek from Terina (southern Italy), who discovered the truth about his son's death while asleep, was the oracle of Avernus (Ogden 2001: 75–6). This would imply that at Avernus visions were attained by means of incubation. However, neither Plutarch nor Cicero, who records a similar story (*Tusc. Disp.* 1. 115), indicate the location of the anonymous oracle centre, and its identification with Avernus is merely a surmise.

[166] *Êrgolabêkotôn ton topon*, 5. 4. 5.

by the fabulous Cimmerians, whose contract was with the anonymous king. Maximus of Tyre describes the attendants at the prophetic cave (*manteion antron*) as necromancers (*psuchagôgoi*),[167] but his testimony, prompted by the association of Avernus with the Homeric *Nekuia*, is unreliable. Nobody knows whether the Cimmerians of Avernus really existed, still less whether they were the priests who guided the sacrifices and propitiation ceremonies, how they gained control of the place, and whether they were called *psuchagôgoi*.

The only clear fact is that the Cimmerians are not the historical semi-nomads living in South Russia, but rather received their name from Homer's mythical people mentioned in the *Nekuia* as inhabiting the extreme west where the sun never shines.[168] Since antiquity, many readers of Homer have opined that the Cimmerians of the Northern Black Sea littoral belonged outside the area of Odysseus' western wanderings. It is therefore suggested that Homer meant Cheimerians or Cerberians, rather than Cimmerians, and that the original name was corrupted in the text of the *Odyssey*. Other authors may have also called the oracle Cerberian, as Pseudo-Scymnus did.[169] Thus, even the (mythical) name of the attendants of the Avernus oracle appears to derive from a mistake.

The most vexing puzzle is that the caverns of the Cimmerians at Avernus have never been seen, either in Strabo's times, or today. We have no means of telling what features (*argillai*) were shown to Ephorus, but he admits that they were out of use when he visited Avernus. Only vague explanations were offered to Ephorus concerning the alleged disappearance of the original oracle. In any case, no caverns matching his description have been discovered so far. Earthquakes and other cataclysms of the last two thousand years have not destroyed the ancient remains in the crater of Avernus: various artificial tunnels constructed near Cumae and listed by Strabo,[170] as well as vestiges of dockyards built by the Roman admiral Agrippa in

[167] *Diss.* 8. 2; Ogden 2001: 69. [168] *Od.* 11. 14.

[169] In the *Odyssey: Cheimeriôn* or *Kerberiôn* instead of *Kimmeriôn*, i.e. either 'wintry people' (*cheimerios*, wintry, stormy) or the inhabitants of the port Cheimerion, by which the famous Thesprotian oracle of the dead was reached, or *Kerberiôn*: Huxley 1958: 243–8; Phillips 1953: 56; Clark 1979: 60, 65, 76, 60–1. Sophocles fragment: *Kerberiôn* (*TGF* 748).

[170] 5. 4. 5.

the late first century BC and of later constructions, are still visible today.[171] While Agrippa's construction projects can perhaps account for the destruction of all traces of the abandoned oracular shrine,[172] the problem remains of the absence of a single testimony to their existence before Agrippa's time. To put it bluntly, nobody ever caught sight of the seat of the oracle at Avernus, still less of cultic activities there. Thus, there is no evidence, either literary or archaeological, for the existence of an oracular centre at Avernus.

The tale of the oracle's disappearance was perhaps invented to provide an explanation for the lack of traces of the oracular cavern, as well as of the underground dwellings. There are several possible solutions to this enigma. It is suggested that the magic waters of the awesome lake alone could suffice for necromancy.[173] Artificial tunnels constructed in Virgil's days are also considered as to have been sufficiently impressive to have inspired the poet.[174] Some still hold the opinion that an Italic subterranean sanctuary really existed at Avernus.[175] R. F. Paget considers subterranean caves he discovered near Baiae as Ephorus' clay-dwellings of the Cimmerians and the seat of the oracle.[176] However, this subterranean complex in all probability operated as a part of canal system serving the therms of Baiae.[177] Moreover, its existence does not help to unravel the mysterious disappearance of every trace of the original oracular shrine at Avernus. Finally, if the cave complex at Baiae served as the seat of the oracle, why did Strabo and other authors ignore it?[178]

[171] Maiuri 1958: 148; Clark 1977: 486; Paget 1967*b*: 93; Pagano *et al.* 1982.

[172] Paget 1967*b*: 120; Hardie 1969: 31; Pagano *et al.* 1982: 275–7.

[173] Ogden 2001: 67.

[174] Latimer 1940: 33.

[175] Peterson 1919: 76; Parke 1988: 93; Kingsley 1995: 134; M. Collard ('La Nécromancie dans l'antiquité', thesis, University of Liège, 1949: 93–4, *non vidi,* reference cited after Ogden).

[176] Paget 1967*a*; cf. Clark 1979: 70.

[177] Lavagne 1988: 482.

[178] Hardie suggests that the complex at Baiae, with its numerous lamp-niches and an elaborate system of passages and chambers, had a religious purpose. This seems plausible to some authors (Austin 1977: 56), but the interpretation of the complex as part of the Therms of Venus is much more convincing. Since the subterranean complex yielded no artefacts and one Latin dipinto only (*MAR*, Paget 1967*b*: 134), Hardie's guesses that the complex had been constructed under Aristodemus, had initially served for Orphic initiations, and later housed Dionysiac rites (Hardie 1969: 31–2), fail to persuade.

The tradition of the Cimmerian oracle at Avernus, the most awesome site in the Phlegraean fields, probably took shape after the area had become the scene of Odysseus' descent into the netherworld, which the myth locates in the land of the Cimmerians.[179] The absence of a real seat of an oracle compelled the authors to render their descriptions vague and to date the activities of the shrine in the undefined past. The myth of the caverns at Avernus was perhaps inspired by other cave oracles of the dead.[180] In fact, not only real *nekuomanteia*, but also fictitious necromantic séances were focused on caves. The association of necromancy with caverns was so strong that Roman authors portrayed their characters as using grottoes for this ominous art, and even creating fissures of their own. Thus, Lucan places the necromantic rite performed by the Thessalian witch Erichto in a cave, whereas Seneca's Tiresias and Ovid's Circe open fissures by magic.[181]

In summary, the historicity of the oracle at Avernus is doubtful. To date, there is no positive evidence for its existence.[182] However, even if the *nekuomanteion* in the Phlegraean fields was a myth, it is significant that it was visualized as located in a cave and operated by cave-dwelling attendants, deprived of the light of the day.

The oracle of Heracles at Bura

The oracle of Heracles was located in a cave near the city of Bura in Achaia. Divination there was by means of a tablet and dice.[183] After a prayer to Heracles, the enquirer threw four dice upon the table; for every number made by dice an explanation was written on the tablet. This description raises more questions than it solves,[184] but it is clear that at least in Pausanias' time the mode of divination at Bura had nothing to do with direct inspiration by a deity.

[179] Hardie 1969: 33.

[180] Clark 1979: 187; cf. Eitrem 1945: 92–3. Norden believes that, before Agrippa's construction boom, a real *nekuomanteion* existed at Avernus (1916: 199–200).

[181] Lucan, *Phars.* 6. 639–53; Sen. *Oed.* 537–47; Ovid. *Met.* 14. 403–11; Lavagne 1988: 674–7; Ogden 2001: 27.

[182] Burkert 2005: 34.

[183] Paus. 7. 25. 10.

[184] On astragalomancy, Frazer 1898: comm. to Paus. 7. 25. 9; Lafonde 2000: 225–6; Halliday 1913: 205–18; Rosenberger 2001: 42–3; Graf 2005: 60–6.

The cave of Heracles has recently been explored. Holes discovered near its opening suggest that in the antiquity there was a portico or a construction befitting an ancient small rural sanctuary.[185] Buildings at the entrance to Heracles' cave are depicted on coins of Bura of the Imperial period.[186]

The association of the cave with Heracles derives perhaps from some local legend whereby the hero descended into Hades from there. As we have seen earlier, lot oracles were sometimes situated in caves. Five kilometres away from Bura, at Aegira, was the cave oracle of Gaia: the people of Achaia appear to have been familiar with the location of oracles in caves.

Elsewhere, caves also housed lot oracles. An alphabetic oracle was engraved on a rock near the entrance to a cave in Lycia, near Kibyra (modern Gölhisar). Each line of this second-century AD inscription begins with a different letter, and it is suggested that to use an alphabetic oracle, the consulter picked a lot with a letter that indicated the sentence which told his fate.[187] Although this technique obviously does not involve any change of consulter's consciousness, the association of any kind of oracle with a cave setting was inherent to such a degree that sites where the divine will defined the mortal's choice of lot were located in a cave or at its entrance.

The Shrine of the August Goddesses in Athens

Pausanias closes his description of the Areopagus with an account of the sanctuary of the Erinyes, euphemistically called the Eumenides (the kindly Ones), or Semnai, the August Goddesses: their name was too dreadful to be pronounced freely.[188] Besides the Erinyes, statues of other underworld deities, Pluto, Hermes, and Gaia, were erected in the shrine, and sacrifices were offered there; the precinct also comprised a monument to Oedipus.[189] The shrine must have been very

[185] Katsounopoulou and Soter 1993; cf. Frazer 1898: comm. to Paus. 7. 25. 9.

[186] Lafonde 2000: 225.

[187] *SEG* 47. 1808; Corsten 1997; Petzl 1997.

[188] For the names see Sommerstein 1989: 11–13; Lloyd-Jones 1989; Heubeck 1986; Henrichs 1994: 28; Johnston 1999: 250–1, 268, 280. K. Clinton suggests that, while the Erinyes are always frightening, there is normally nothing sinister about the Eumenides (Clinton 1996: 165–70).

[189] Paus. 1. 28. 6.

ancient: in 632 some supporters of Cylon's abortive coup were murdered beside altars of the August Goddesses at the Areopagus.[190]

In Homer the Erinyes are the avengers of crimes, mainly between blood kin; in Archaic art, they are usually represented as terrifying snakes; they also dwell in the darkness of Erebus, under the earth,[191] and hence undoubtedly belong to the netherworld. The Earth is their mother in Hesiod's *Theogony*.[192] In the earliest surviving commentary on an Orphic poem, the Derveni papyrus, the Eumenides (and most probably the Erinyes as well) are identified as souls, presumably of those who died a violent death, and they are to be propitiated with sacrifices. The identification of the Eumenides with the souls of the dead may have been taken by the Derveni author from traditional beliefs.[193]

Aeschylus depicts the Erinyes as worshipped in caverns or 'in subterranean places'.[194] In Euripides' *Electra*, the dread goddesses depart by sinking into a 'cleft beside the hill, a holy, venerated prophetic shrine for mortals'.[195] The shrine of the August Goddesses appears to have been located near the hill of Areopagus, in a cave believed to be an entrance to the netherworld, which the Erinyes themselves used in order to withdraw from this world. This may explain the association of the precinct of the Erinyes with Oedipus, who disappeared from the earth by an 'underground way': in fact, the August Goddesses possessed another shrine in Colonus, the traditional place of Oedipus' demise.[196]

The cleft of the Erinyes has probably been identified. A mass of huge stones, broken away from the Areopagus, forms a long and deep passage or cleft along the north-eastern side of the hill. This cleft continues under the hill for an undeterminable length.[197]

Euripides is the only author who refers to the prophetic role of the cleft of the Erinyes.[198] However, on the basis of Euripides' testimony,

190 Thuc. 1. 126. On the cult of the Semnai see Parker 1996: 298; Johnston 1999: 270–3.

191 *Il.* 9. 572; 19. 259; Sommerstein 1989: 7–8; Johnston 1999: 252–3.

192 Vv. 184–6.

193 Cols. 1 and 6, Betegh 2004: 85–9; Lloyd-Jones 1989: 4; *contra*: Johnston 1999: 276–8.

194 *Eumen.* 804–7, 1023.

195 *Semnon . . . eusebes chrêstêrion,* Eur. *El.* 1271–2.

196 *Oed. Col.* 1590; Wickens 1986: 2: 396; Lloyd-Jones 1989: 9.

197 Wickens 1986: 2: 392–3.

198 In the Derveni papyrus, the columns dealing with the Erinyes and the Eumenides (1–4 and 6) flank column 5 discussing oracles and their comprehension by

in conjunction with the abundant evidence on the oracular properties of caves believed to be entrances into the netherworld, it seems feasible to assume that there was a prophetic aspect in the cult of the Erinyes at the fissure by the Areopagus.

Cave oracles along the valley of Meander

The valley of Meander in Asia Minor presents a distinctive type of oracles. They were located in caves emitting mephitic gases, deadly or dangerous for ordinary people. Strabo reports the existence of three Charonia along the Meander: at Hierapolis, at Acharaca, and the Aornum near Magnesia, and explains the multiplicity of cave oracles by soil conditions, favouring the formation of caves.[199]

Hierapolis

Plutonium near the Meander at Hierapolis (modern Pamukkale) was a deep cave with a narrow opening (*stomion*), filled with misty poisonous vapours, which killed every animal entering the cave. Only the *galli*, eunuch priests of Cybele were able to enter the cave, either due to their techniques of holding their breath, or antidotes, or a phenomenon like *enthousiasmos*.[200] The Plutonium has been identified: it comprises a deep chamber and a hole, 0.9 m wide, emitting highly poisonous gases. Even in the courtyard in front of this chamber the smell is very sharp, and the doorway to the inner part of the Plutonium is blocked for security reasons. Thus, ancient accounts of gas discharge have been verified by modern scientists and found precise.[201]

A fragment from a treatise by a sixth-century AD Neoplatonist, Damascius, describes a temple of Apollo at Hierapolis, with a descent (*catabasion*) into the noxious grotto. Inside the cavern, Damascius dreamt that he was a *gallus* Attis, that Cybele ordered him to celebrate

the mortals. This proximity may hint at the vatic aspect of the Erinyes, but the text is too fragmented to allow any positive statements.

[199] Strabo 12. 8. 17; cf. 14. 1. 11; Iambl. *De myst.* 4. 1. On oracles located near sources of poisonous gases elsewhere in the Mediterranean see Croon 1952.

[200] Strabo 13. 4. 14; Plin. *Hist. Nat.* 2. 95; Dio Cass. 68. 27. 3.

[201] Bean 1989: 202–4, fig. 82; Cross and Aaronson 1988; Negri and Leucci 2006.

the festival of Hilaria in her honour, and that he would return from the netherworld. The dream is obviously suggested by the cult and mythology of the place, and includes motives characteristic of initiations into mystery cults, such as the promise of escape from Hades.[202]

Excavations of the site revealed a temple of Apollo datable to the first century AD, adjacent to the cavern. This temple was probably built on the site of an earlier temple, but even if the earlier building existed, it could not have predated the first century BC, since it remained unknown to Strabo.[203] There was direct access to the Plutonium from inside the temple of Apollo. Recent geophysical research demonstrates that a fault passed immediately beneath the temple.[204] The existence of a direct connection between the mephitic cavern and the temple of Apollo suggests that Damascius' description is correct: one could enter the grotto from the temple.

A stele discovered in the sanctuary is decorated with a double axe and a pair of ears and bears a dedication to Apollo Carios by Apollophanes son of Apollonides.[205] The name of the dedicant shows that the devotion to Apollo was hereditary in his family; unfortunately, the nature of this commitment remains obscure. In the area of Hierapolis Apollo was represented as a rider holding the double axe and worshipped as *Lairbenos*; it is also suggested that in this region Leto was amalgamated with Cybele.[206] The epiclesis of Apollo, the Carian, indicates the god's prophetic function, which is attested to by a series of inscriptions citing his oracular responses.[207] It is significant that in the Hierapolis area an indigenous god, associated with ancient local divinatory practices, was assimilated with Apollo and worshipped as the main prophetic deity, instead of the Pythian Apollo.

[202] Zintzen 1967: 176 (*Epitoma Photiana* fr. 131). In this passage, the cavern is called *bothron* and *muchos*; Damascius' dream is referred to as *onar* which he saw 'when asleep inside', *egkatheudêsas*.

[203] Bean 1989: 206–7; de Bernardi Ferraro 1993: 138–43; Negri and Leucci 2006.

[204] Negri and Leucci 2006.

[205] *SEG* 47. 1734; Ceylan and Ritti 1997.

[206] Cook 1914–40: ii. 565–8; Croon 1952: 76; Ceylan and Ritti 1997: 63.

[207] De Bernardi Ferraro 1993: 143; Ceylan and Ritti 1997: 59; Pugliese Carratelli 1965*a*; Cazzaniga 1966. For the connection of Hierapolis to various vatic figures, see Bean 1989: 207; Ceylan and Ritti 1997. A number of monuments, including a statue, relief representations, and inscriptions, attest to the local cult of Apollo Carios in the city of Hierapolis and in a sanctuary located at the modern village of Güselpinar (*SEG* 45. 1753, with comm.; Ceylan and Ritti 1997).

The details of the ritual at the Hierapolis sanctuary remain obscure. The indigenous goddess, known as the mistress of mountains and caves and identified with Cybele, was probably the original owner of the mephitic chasm, which the Greeks associated with Pluto.[208] This tradition may account for the joint worship of Cybele and Apollo in the sanctuary during the first centuries AD and for the role of Cybele's priests in the oracular cult. Apollo was a newcomer to the site: his temple was constructed there only after Strabo's time, that is, after the mid-first century AD. The most probable functional explanation for the direct connection between the temple of Apollo and the Plutonium would be utilization of the hallucinogenic qualities of the gas. It seems that Apollo's abode was founded near the mephitic chasm in order to evoke (prophetic) visions.

Acharaca

Strabo describes the cave named Charonion at Acharaca.[209] Sick people were brought to the cave and left in quiet and without food for many days, 'like (animals) in a den' (*kataper en phôleôi*). In certain cases, the diseased themselves were blessed with visions sent by the gods, and

[208] Ceylan and Ritti 1997: 65. Another cave oracle associated with Cybele probably existed at Aezani in Phrygia. A splendid mid-2nd cent. AD temple there features a large (almost 25 m long) subterranean barrel-vaulted cavern, approached by a wooden staircase (Akurgal 1978: 267–70; Spawforth 2006: 219–20). The temple belonged to Zeus, but the subterranean structure served for the worship of Meter, as R. Naumann has demonstrated (Naumann 1967; Robert 1981: 353). The two deities are mentioned together in the inscriptions as the main deities of Aezani and terracotta figurines of Cybele were found there. The grotto was entered from the opisthodomos, above which an imposing female protome emerging from acanthus leaves topped the gable, whereas the gable above the entrance to the cella was decorated with a male figure. The artificial grotto in the temple seems to emulate a natural cave located near the city, known as Steunos. This cave, believed to be the birthplace of Zeus and sacred to Meter (Paus. 8. 4. 3; 10. 32. 4), served as a place of worship from the 1st cent. BC to the mid-2nd cent. AD, when it was eclipsed by the newly erected temple (Cook 1914–40: iii. 964–8; Robert 1981: 348, 354; Mitchell 1995: ii. 18–19). If the 1st–3rd-cent. AD inscription citing an oracle, which was discovered at Aezani (Merkelbach and Stauber 2001: 3: 16/23/01), refers to an uttering by a local deity, this suggests that Aezani was an oracular centre. In that case, the artificial vault served perhaps as a place where Meter revealed her oracles. (Parke 1985: 208–9 and Merkelbach and Stauber 2001: 3: comm. to 16/23/01, attribute the oracle from Aezani to Apollo of Claros on the very tenuous ground that Zeus, Meter, and the Cabires are referred to in a Clarian oracle cited in an inscription from Pergamum, Robert 1981: 359.)

[209] 14. 1. 44. I treat this subject in detail elsewhere: Ustinova 2002.

heeded to their prescriptions, or otherwise the priests slept in the Charonion on behalf of the suppliants, and through dreams learnt their cure. The place was forbidden and deadly to everybody but the sick and the priests. The enquirers usually received guidance from the priests, who initiated them into the mysteries. Acharaca was also the site of an annual festival. In a nocturnal ceremony, the participants could see and hear 'all these things', while at noon nude boys and young men led a bull into the cave and left it there to die.

In Acharaca we find a medical oracle (*iatromanteion*) where at least some of enquirers seeking a cure experienced direct contact with the divinity, obviously in a state of delusion brought on by the poisonous gas, the frightening surroundings, and the long fast, and enhanced by their malady. Presumably all the sick were initiated into the mysteries, which were also celebrated in the annual nocturnal rite. Transition rites are indicated by the involvement of the nude youths.[210]

Strabo refers to another Charonion emitting deadly vapours, at the village of Thymbria, situated in the valley of Meander between Magnesia and Myos.[211] No details of the cult there are known. Geological conditions in the valley of Meander are responsible for the emergence of several oracular shrines associated with caves. The concentration of poisonous gases inside the caverns was higher than outside, and since these gases could cause hallucinations, regarded as divinely inspired revelations, caves became sacred to gods. The choice of Pluto and Charon as tutelary gods of the Meander caverns may ensue from their reputation as fatal for many mortals, as well as from the common belief that caves led into the netherworld. Most instructive is the physical connection between the Plutonium and the temple of Apollo in Hierapolis, which demonstrates how the 'prophetic qualities' of the gas from the Plutonium were employed in the service of the arrogant Olympian patron of prophecy.

Cave oracles of Gaia

That Gaia, the goddess of the Earth, would be worshipped near or inside openings leading into the depths of the earth, appears as self-evident as

[210] For the gods worshipped at Acharaca and the archaeological research on the site and its vicinity see Radet 1890: 227–30; Buresch 1894: 130; Cook 1914–40: i. 503–4; Laumonier 1958: 507–8.

[211] 12. 8. 17; 14. 1 .11.

the location of Plutonia and *nekuomanteia* at such places. In fact, there were natural and artificial clefts and fissures in several of Gaia's sanctuaries, for instance in Athens and in Hierapolis.[212] Known as *prômantis*, 'the first source of divination',[213] Gaia possessed a number of oracles. Whether the Delphic oracle once belonged to her remains an open question.[214] In any case, the association of divination with the goddess of the Earth seems to be very ancient. An early fourth-century calendar of sacrifices from Marathon refers to Gaia 'at the oracle'.[215] In several cases, Gaia's oracle is unequivocally focused on a natural cleft or cavern.[216]

Aegira

An oracle of the Gaia at Aegira in Achaia was located in a cave (*specus*), into which the priestess descended to utter prophecy. The priestess had to be chaste, and was tested by the drinking of bull's blood.[217] Pliny connects this procedure to the subsequent prophecy-giving, whereas Pausanias describes it as a test of the priestess's purity. Since sheep's blood was drunk by the prophetess of Apollo Pythaeus at Argos,[218] blood appears to have been regarded as a prophecy-inspiring substance. Pausanias' note on a most ancient effigy of the goddess, preserved at the temple, hints at the cult's antiquity. It is suggested that the motive underlying the priestess' descent was a belief that 'by entering a cavern the servant of the goddess came into closer contact with the divine'.[219] In fact, the shrine at Aegira epitomizes the pristine idea that superhuman knowledge comes from the depths of the Earth. Although nothing is known about techniques of divination at Aegira, there is no doubt that the priestess' inspiration was ascribed to the Earth and was to be reached inside its entrails, in the cave.

[212] Paus 1. 18. 7; Lucian., *De dea Syr.* 12–13.
[213] Aesch. *Eumen.* 2; Motte 1973: 281–6.
[214] See above, Ch. 2.1.
[215] *Epi tôi manteiôi*, *IG* ii^2 1358, 2. 14.
[216] Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: ii. 251–60.
[217] Plin. *Hist. Nat.* 28. 41. 147; Paus. 7. 25. 13.
[218] Paus. 2. 24. 1; Halliday 1913: 106; Vollgraff 1956: 41; Piérart 1990; Dietrich 1978: 6; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 171.
[219] Parke and Wormell 1956: i. 10; Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: ii. 254.

Olympia

The altar of Gaia, one of the most ancient structures in the sanctuary of Olympia, appears to have existed as early as the eighth century.[220] In Pausanias' days, the altar of Gaia was made of ashes, like that of Zeus. Pausanias also says that 'in ancient times, there was an oracle (*manteion*) of Gaia in this place', and continues: 'above what is called "the cave" (or "the mouth of the cave"—*stomion*) an altar of Themis has been built'.[221]

The roles of Zeus and Gaia in the eighth-century mantic in Olympia are unclear. During the historical period, the oracle active in Olympia belonged to Zeus.[222] The transition from Gaia to Themis to Zeus in Pausanias' account hints perhaps at a succession similar to the pattern known from Delphi: Gaia (to whom 'the cave' belonged)–her daughter Themis–a male deity.[223] It has been suggested that this succession may also result from a later imitation of Delphi.[224] However, the primitive form of both Zeus' and Gaia's ash altars, and their concentration in the same locale, presumably the ancient nucleus of the sanctuary, indicate that the cult of the Earth had a long history of its own in Olympia, although the *stomion* has never been identified at the site.[225]

3. ORACLES OF UNDERGROUND DWELLERS[226]

In his list of seers who uttered gods' orders not only when alive, but also after their death, Strabo[227] mentions 'Amphiaraus, Trophonius, Orpheus, Musaeus, and the god of the Getae, formerly Zalmoxis, a Pythagorean,

[220] Sinn 2000: 11; cf. Quantin 1992: 180.

[221] Paus. 5. 14. 10. He explains that he enumerates these altars not in their topographic order, but according to the order of sacrifices at the site.

[222] Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: ii. 332; Sinn 2000: 15–22; 1994.

[223] Curtius 1894; Herrmann 1972: 28; Mallwitz 1972: 65. For the first owners of the Delphic oracle, see Ch. 2.5.

[224] Jacquemin 1999: 187.

[225] Sinn 2000: fig. 2; Parke 1967*a*: 27. See Curtius 1894: 53 on Gaia's mantic elsewhere in Greece.

[226] For a more comprehensive treatment of the subject, see Ustinova 2002.

[227] 16. 2. 39, following Posidonios of Apamea (*FGH* 87 F 70).

who is in our time Decaeneus, the diviner of Byrebistas'.[228] The juxtaposition of Greek and barbaric oracle givers, heroes, and philosophers contains an insight into some fundamental features shared by these characters.

In addition to vatic talents, common to all the mythical figures in these lists, Zalmoxis, Decaeneus, Amphiaraus, and Trophonius are marked by their exceptional mode of existence: while still alive, they descended underground, continuing their involvement in the life of mortals and remaining invisible to human eyes. Greek mythology supplies further instances of solitary underground dwellers, who were neither mortals nor gods. The location of their subterranean abodes is noteworthy: almost all of them are positioned in the Northern and Central Balkans.

Trophonius[229]

Trophonius,[230] whose oracle was in Lebadeia (Boeotia),[231] was also believed to have vanished there beneath the earth. From then on, he lived in a cave under a hill as an oracular god.[232] In both literary and epigraphic sources, the act of consultation of the oracle is described as catabasis[233] whereas the place of the oracle is called 'an underground

[228] Aristides (*Orat.* 38. 21) groups together Trophonius, Amphiaraus, Amphilochos, and the Asclepiads. Celsus includes Zalmoxis, Mopsos, Amphilochos, Amphiaraus, and Trophonius in his register of mortals who died and were nevertheless worshipped, which makes Origen wonder 'whether one of these is either a *daimon*, or a hero, or perhaps a god, more active than mortals' (*Contra Cels.* 3. 34–5). Celsus observes that these *daimonia*, who 'settling in a certain place, live there', are in fact 'gods in human form' (*anthrôpoeideis theôreisthai theous*): Orig. *Contra Cels.* 7. 35; cf. Rohde 1925: 104; Bonnechere 2003: 94–128.

[229] The most systematic and profound research on Trophonius was conducted by P. Bonnechere: 2003, as well as a series of papers, Bonnechere and Bonnechere 1989; Bonnechere 1998, 1999, 2003.

[230] The name probably derives from *trephô,* 'to rear': Schachter 1981–94: iii. It has also been suggested that it may result from a phonetic adaptation of a non-Greek name: Schachter 1981–94: iii. 72.

[231] For the oracle and its history, see Bonnechere 2003; Schachter 1967; 1981–94: iii. 66–89; 1984; Clark 1968.

[232] Paus. 9. 37. 3.

[233] Aristoph. *Nub.* 508; Her. 8. 134; Semos of Delos, *FGH* 396 F10 (in Athen. 14. 614A); Paus. 9. 39; *IG* VII. 4136. Dicaearchus, a pupil of Aristotle, wrote a treatise entitled 'Descent into the Trophonium' (*Hê eis Trophoniou katabasis*, fr. 13–22 Wehrli; Athen. 13. 594 EF and 14. 641 EF; cf. Schachter 1967: n. 11; 1981–94: iii. 80; Bonnechere 1998: 445; Clark 1968, 1979: 56).

abode' (*oikêsis katôruchê*), 'chasm' (*chasma*), 'cave' (*stomion* or *spêlaion*),[234] and 'Trophonius' inner chamber' (*thalamai Trophôniou*).[235] Trophonius himself is regarded as a god, rather than a hero.[236]

The oracle in Lebadeia already existed by the sixth century. Croesus' and Mys' consultations of Trophonius[237] may be legendary, but the oracle is mentioned frequently enough in fifth-century Attic drama,[238] which means that the Athenian public was familiar with the procedure of catabasis into Trophonius' cave.[239] Trophonius is mentioned in the sixth-century *Telegony*, and by Pindar.[240]

The preparation for the consultation took several days and included not only preliminary sacrifices, but also secluded lodging in a small building sacred to Agathos Daimon and Tyche, cold baths, prayers, special diet, and sexual abstinence, as well as music and dancing.[241] Only when well-prepared for the tremendous experience, that is, exhausted, tense with anticipation, and disposed to hallucinating,[242] did the consulter descend to Trophonius' cave.

The symbolism of the Trophonium was that of the netherworld: at night two boys called *Hermai*, that is, two psychopomps (conductors of souls), personifying Hermes the guide of the souls to Hades, led the enquirer to the oracular cave. In fact, the cave at Lebadeia is sometimes considered as an entrance to the netherworld.[243] On his way, the consulter had to drink from the water of two springs, bearing the names of the rivers of the netherworld, Lethe and Mnemosyne.[244] However, it is to be borne in mind that, since Trophonius

[234] Charax, *FGH* 103 F5; Strabo 9. 2. 38; Lucian. *Dial. Mort.* 3; *Menipp.* 22, *Dial. Mort.* 3; Schachter 1981–94: iii. 75.

[235] Eur. *Ion* 394.

[236] Schol. Aristoph. *Nub.* 508; cf. Schachter 1981–94: iii. 71; Bonnechere 2003: 358.

[237] Her. 1. 46, 8. 134.

[238] e.g. Aristoph. *Nub.* 508; Eur. *Ion* 300–2, 404–9.

[239] Bonnechere 1998: 100.

[240] Fr. 3 Maehler, in Plut. *Consol. Apoll.* 109A.

[241] Paus. 9. 39. 4–5, cf. Philostr. *Vita Apoll.* 8. 19. Several comedy fragments are added to Pausanias' testimony, see Bonnechere 2003: 186. For the ceremony at the Trophonium, see Deubner 1900: 17–28; Bonnechere 2003: 32–61, esp. 40–1, 139–64, 236–48; 2007: 34–6. For the site, see Schachter 1981–94: iii. 72–9; Bonnechere 1998: 91–6; 2003: 7–26.

[242] Bonnechere 2003: 150–3.

[243] Ibid. 246–8.

[244] Schachter 1981–94: iii. 82–3; Bonnechere 1998: 101; 1999: 268; 2003: 221–71.

was alive in his subterranean abode, the catabasis into the cave could not be completely equated with a journey to Hades.

The consulter had to bring with him honey cakes for the snakes awaiting him at the bottom of the cave.[245] The prophetic adyton (holy of holies) was most probably an artificial circular hole, several metres deep: the enquirer lay on the ground, and then, according to Pausanias, he was swiftly drawn into another hole, as if by an eddy (*dinê*).[246] P. Bonnechere suggests that the inner space was actually a small recess at the bottom of the larger grotto, where only the feet of the consulter entered, while he remained stretched out on the floor.[247] In fact, the image of the whirl could derive from the vortex experienced by the enquirers at the beginning of their prophetic trance, that is, altered state of consciousness, induced by the immersion into the dark coolness of the grotto.[248]

Immediately after his stay in the underground cave, the consulter took a seat on the chair of Mnemosyne and recounted his experience to the priests. Only after this procedure was the suppliant, semiconscious and paralysed with terror, allowed to be taken away by his relatives.[249] The underground experiences of the enquirers were so awesome that they lost the ability to smile, which gave raise to the proverb 'He consulted the Trophonium'.[250]

Trophonius was believed to appear to the enquirers in person.[251] The consulter's experience in the Trophonium is described by Plutarch in *The Daimonion of Socrates*.[252] This is a fascinating account of the communication of a young man named Timarchus, who spent

[245] Aristoph. *Nub.* 506–8 with schol.; Lucian. *Dial. mort.* 3; Paus. 9. 39. 11; Philostr. *Vita Apoll.* 8. 19. On snakes as givers of prophetic powers, see Halliday 1913: 82–90.

[246] Paus. 9. 39. 11.

[247] On the shape of the prophetic cavern and the position of the consulter, see Bonnechere 2003: 159–63. A different reconstruction: Rosenberger 2001: 37–8, fig. 2. A 3rd-cent. AD construction, 3.5 m deep and 1.9 m in diameter, served perhaps as the adyton after the earlier oracular grotto had been destroyed by the Heruli (Bonnechere 2003: 20–1).

[248] On the vortex, see Ch. 1.2. On the reclining position and hallucinating, see Ch. 1.4.

[249] Paus. 9. 39. 13; Bonnechere 2003: 249–71.

[250] Athen. 614 B.

[251] Maxim. Tyr. *Diss.* 8. 2; Orig. *Contra Cels.* 3. 34, cf. Rohde 1925: 105; Bonnechere and Bonnechere 1989: 291; Bonnechere 2003: 185; Schachter 1981–94: iii. 80.

[252] 590B–592F; Corlu 1970.

two nights and a day in the cave, in a world beyond normal experience. He could not discern whether he was awake or dreaming, but it seemed to him that after passing through profound darkness, he was struck on the head, 'the sutures parted and released his soul'.[253] In a sleep or in trance, Timarchus' soul flew above an ocean with shining isles,[254] and in a mixture of joyfulness and awe he heard voices that explained to him the mystery of metempsychosis and predicted his imminent death.

For the purposes of the present discussion, Timarchus' historicity as a person is insignificant.[255] The most substantial inference from Plutarch's description is that in his time at the latest an enquirer in the Trophonium lived through an out-of-body experience, indicated by a range of the symptoms discussed in Chapter 1: lack of awareness of the surroundings, passage through darkness to translucent and pure light, flight over a magnificent country, visual and auditory hallucinations, feeling of unearthly happiness, and the final gift of clairvoyance. Quite predictably, Timarchus' altered state of consciousness was accompanied by culturally patterned visions, reflecting Greek religious and philosophical ideas, such as mythical geography of the netherworld, as well as the notions of the soul, its liberty, and need of purification. The variance in the kind of hallucinations experienced in the Trophonium was known to Pausanias, who observes that inside the adyton different enquirers learn the future in different ways, sometimes by sight and at other times by hearing.[256] To achieve this state, the suppliant did not need other influences in addition to his being alone in awe-inspiring surroundings.[257]

A major source of *The Daimonion of Socrates* was Plato's *Phaedon*,[258] which is saturated with references to altered states of consciousness, like

[253] *Mor.* 590B.

[254] On the mystical light appearing to the sleepers, and on voices heard in dreams, as described in Aristides, *Orations*, see Hamilton 1906: 4–5.

[255] Cf. Bonnechere 1998: 449, with bibliography.

[256] Paus. 9. 39. 11; Clark 1968: 70.

[257] P. Bonnechere (2003: 154–64; 2002) describes the experience of enquirers at Trophonium as an 'altered state of consciousness'. On the phenomenon of self-inflicted trance, see Hani 1975. For a different approach, see Hamilton 1906: 89; Clark 1968: 73; Schachter 1981–94: iii. 83. For an analysis of the proceedings in the Trophonium in terms of Jung's psychology, see Meier 1949: 87–111.

[258] Babut 1984: 51, 72; Bonnechere 1998: 452–3.

a number of other Plato's works.[259] Moreover, in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, where the action in Socrates' 'place of contemplation' (*frontistêrion*) is compared to a catabasis to the Trophonium, several passages[260] hint at phenomena apparently very similar to those mentioned by Plutarch. These include the opposition of memory and oblivion, independence of soul, and its levitation. It is therefore reasonable to assume that altered states of consciousness were experienced in the Trophonium as early as in the fifth century.[261]

In mythology, Trophonius and his brother (or stepfather) Agamedes were legendary architects, whose works included the lower courses of Apollo's Delphic temple (or probably its adyton[262]) and other masterpieces. Most structures were secret chambers, closed to all but a few humans and visited by the gods, Zeus and Apollo.[263] Supernatural features of these constructions, where encounters between the human and the divine took place, indicate their builders' proximity to magicians.[264]

Pausanias tells the story of a stratagem used by the brothers while building the treasury of Hyrieus, which proved to be fatal for them.[265] By employing this stratagem, they were able to keep entering the treasury and stealing from it. When finally Agamedes was trapped, Trophonius was forced to kill him and cut off his head, lest the identity of the thieves be disclosed.[266] The earth swallowed up Trophonius in Lebadeia, at the spot where the bothros (sacrificial pit) of Agamedes was located in Pausanias' time. In another version of Trophonius' death, presumably intended to provide a 'civilized' explanation for a bizarre phenomenon, Trophonius descended to a

[259] See above, Introduction, and below, Ch. 5.1. Cf. Nieto 1997: 39.

[260] Vv. 508, 483–5, 227–30, 319; Bonnechere 1998; 2003: 132–8, 192–6. See also below, Ch. 5.2.

[261] Although in other cases the distinction between altered states of consciousness and incubation is not always entirely clear, Plutarch's description and Aristophanes' allusions attest without a doubt to trance, rather than 'mundane' incubation, as suggested by Ogden 2001: 82.

[262] Bonnechere 1999: 269–75; 2003: 71–5.

[263] Paus. 9. 11. 1; cf. Deubner 1900: 19.

[264] Bonnechere 1999: 280.

[265] 9. 37. 3; Bonnechere 2003: 75–8.

[266] Cf. Moreau 1997: 58 on Agamedes' decapitation in the contexts of initiatory rituals and shamanic rites. On the cult of severed human heads see also Ustinova 1999: 97–9, 169.

subterranean dwelling, because of his ambition or vanity,[267] wishing to hide his remains and thus to make people believe that he had become a god.[268]

This myth recorded by Pausanias is a clone of the legend of Rhampsinitos in the Egyptian logos of Herodotus.[269] It also has numerous less exact parallels in world folklore,[270] and could easily have been adopted for local needs. Trickery and magic art are indeed intimately connected, therefore the story stuck to Trophonius.[271] In any case, vanishing into the earth does not necessarily ensue from the beginning of Pausanias' biography of Trophonius: one can imagine a different ending, such as a punishment for fratricide or a continuation of Trophonius' career. In another version of the tale Trophonius hid in an underground shelter, and lived there till his death, and it was only after his demise that the oracle was founded.[272] This divergence indicates perhaps that a migrant subject of ruse was employed to explain an already existing fact. Furthermore, Trophonius' disappearance into the earth is far from being heroic. The invention of the unflattering aetiological myth seems to have been necessary in order to account for Trophonius' subterranean dwelling.

Pausanias compares Trophonius with Asclepius, the half-god, half-hero, and a patron of healing who possessed numerous oracular centres at Epidaurus, Pergamum, and elsewhere. In these sanctuaries, the god appeared to the sick in their dreams, instructing them in the methods of treatment appropriate to their sicknesses.[273] In the sanctuary at Lebadeia stood a statue of Trophonius and his daughter Hercyna, which could be taken as representing Asclepius and Hygieia: both pairs had snakes as their attributes. A statue of Trophonius himself, created by

[267] Schol. in Aristoph. *Nub.* 508; Greg. Naz. *In sancta lumina,* Migne 36 col. 340; Schol. in Lucian. *Dial. Mort.* 10.

[268] Contrary to these writers, Pindar (Fr. 3 Maehler, in Plut. *Mor.* 108F–109B) asserts that Trophonius and Agamedes were granted death by Apollo as a reward for the construction of the temple in Delphi. Cf. Bonnechere 1999: 263–9.

[269] Her. 2. 121.

[270] How and Wells 1928: i. 225; Aly 1969: 67; Lloyd 1988: ii. 53–4.

[271] This story had a version with another king, Augias, in Hyrieus' stead, Charax of Pergamum, *FGH* 103 F5. Since a crater featuring 'the history of Trophonius, Agamedes and Augias' is mentioned in the *Telegony,* this version dates back to the 6th cent. (Bonnechere 1999: 276, 289).

[272] Charax, *FGH* 103 F5.

[273] Edelstein and Edelstein 1948.

Praxitiles, resembled Asclepius.[274] Moreover, it was said that Trophonius, like Asclepius, could appear to mortals in the shape of a snake.[275] The proximity between Trophonius and Asclepius is implied by the fact that they are attributed the same father, either Apollo, or Ischys.[276]

Amphiaraus[277]

Amphiaraus, a famous seer, and a descendant of the prophet Melampous, was believed to have been swallowed up by the earth when he fled from Thebes.[278] The chasm was opened before him by Zeus, who saved him thereby from death at the hands of his foes, and made him immortal.[279]

Although Amphiaraus' most famous oracle was in Oropus,[280] it was also said that he had a shrine near Thebes.[281] The Theban oracle of Amphiaraus is reported by Herodotus to be one of the most prominent oracles in Greece, and to have been consulted by Croesus and Mys.[282] Nevertheless, the oracle at Oropus is probably the original and the only Amphiaraeum,[283] since the deity was conceived as physically present at his cult place.

274 Paus. 9. 39. 2–3.

275 Schol. Ariastoph. *Nub.* 508. On serpents brought as embodiments of Asclepius to the god's newly founded sanctuaries, see Paus. 2. 10. 3; *IG* ii^{2} 4960, Liv. *Epit.* 10. cf. Aston 2004: 29.

276 Cicero (*De natura deorum* 3. 22) asserts that the two heroes were sons of Valens (i.e. Ischys) and Coronis, that is, brothers. For Trophonius' genealogy, see Bonnechere 2003: 87–92. It is noteworthy that after Trophonius disappeared beneath the earth and his brother perished, the throne of Orchomenos passed to Ascalaphos and Ialmenes (Paus. 9. 38. 3), the former name being probably a version of 'Asclepius'.

277 The most comprehensive study of Amphiaraus: Sineux 2007.

278 For the literary tradition see Vicaire 1979.

279 Pind. *Nem* 9. 24–7; 10. 8–9; an epic fragment, perhaps originating in the *Thebaid* (Fr. 9 Davies); Eur. *Suppl.* 926; Paus. 1. 34. 1; Apollod. 3. 6. 8; Sineux 2007: 59–65. There is iconographic evidence, as well: Krauskopf 1981: nos. 37–41, 44–6; see Rohde 1925: 89–90; Carnoy 1956. See Ahl 1994: 130–1 on the Roman version of the myth in Statius, *Thebaid* 7. 749–823.

280 Schachter 1981–94: i. 19–26.

281 Strabo 9. 2. 10; Paus. 9. 8. 3; cf. Hubbard 1992: 103; Symeonoglou 1985: 157.

282 Her. 1. 46; 1. 52; 8. 134.

283 Schachter 1981–94: i. 22–3; cf. Parker 1996: 146–9. P. Sineux suggests that, in the myth, Amphiaraus disappeared at Thebes and emerged from the depths of the earth at Oropus, and that his cult moved from Thebes to Oropus in the 5th cent. (Sineux 2007: 79–80).

In the fifth century the Amphiaraeum at Oropus was a most popular healing oracle; inscriptions and dedications of models of various parts of the body testify to its curative powers.[284] The consultation, at least from that period on, was by incubation on ram skins, while patients were visited in their sleep by the seer in person: there is no mention of a prophet in the evidence on the Amphiaraeum.[285]

A most curious detail concerning the layout of this sanctuary appears in a late source, *Pictures* by Philostratus from Lemnos (*c.* AD 165–245). A depiction of Amphiaraus' sanctuary featured 'a place of contemplation', *phrontistêrion*, consisting of a 'sacred fissure', *rhêgma hieron,* and located near a 'gate of dreams', as well as an image of the Truth, *Alêtheia*, clad in a white robe. The existence of the 'gate of dreams' is explained by the requirements of the incubation.[286] The attribution of a *phrontistêrion* to Amphiaraus might result from confusion between this personage and Trophonius, since the two were often mentioned in one breath; the sacred fissure may have been copied from the practice at Delphi, the oracular centre *par excellence.* Yet it is plausible that the similarity of the unflattering foundation myths of the Trophonium and the Amphiaraeum ensued from the similarity in the ritual, and that the sanctuary of Amphiaraus originally contained a fissure, which was perhaps revered as the chasm opened by Zeus for Amphiaraus and as his subsequent dwelling.[287] The *koimêtêrion,* 'sleeping place', where the incubation took place in the late fifth–early fourth century,[288] was probably constructed to provide accommodation for the growing numbers of enquirers.

Another interesting detail reported by Philostratus is the requirement that the consulter fast for a day and abstain from drinking wine

[284] Hamilton 1906: 80–7; Parker 1996: 146.

[285] Paus. 1. 34. 5; Soph. *Electra* 836; Cic. *De div.* 1. 88; Schachter 1981–94: i. 21; Petropoulou 1985; Ustinova 2002: 269; Ogden 2001: 85–90; Sineux 2007: 159–86. On magic properties of animal skins see also below, Ch. 5.2. According to a legend told in Phlius (Peloponnesus), Amphiaraus himself began to divine after having slept in a building called the House of Divination. Ever since then, the building has been shut (Paus. 2. 13. 7). This story may reflect the ritual of incubation in a closed chamber, associated with Amphiaraus.

[286] Philostratus, *Imagines* 1. 27. 3. For the attribution of this work see Nesselrath 1997: 274.

[287] Ogden 2001: 86.

[288] Sokolowski 1969: no. 69.

for three days before the incubation in the Amphiaraeum. Abstention, even that brief, would enhance the enquirers' disposition to visions.[289]

Asclepius

As mentioned above, the rites, iconography, and spheres of competence of Trophonius and Amphiaraus closely resemble those of Asclepius. In the oracular shrines at Oropus and in Lebadeia the consulter received the response directly from the hero, whom he saw in a dream or in a revelation. The Amphiaraeum and the Trophonium share this feature with the dream oracles of Asclepius. Greek healing was indeed interwoven with divination, as demonstrated by countless instances of seers who purged cities of epidemics and the practice of seeking oracular prescriptions by means of incubation.[290]

It is noteworthy that catabasis to the adyton was performed by the consulter in the Asclepiaeum in Tricca, the most ancient of all Asclepius' sanctuaries.[291] The temple of Asclepius at Tricca has not yet been discovered. In the Asclepiaeum in Epidaurus the enquirer saw and heard the god in his dreams;[292] the contact between the enquirer and the god in the Asclepiaeum in Tricca was almost certainly envisaged in the same way. The cult pattern based on Asclepius' presence in the sanctuary probably developed in Tricca where the divine healer originally belonged, and spread to other cult centres which had to invent their own myths of Asclepius' origin to endorse their reputation as sacred locations allowing numenic encounters with the god.[293] The cult of Asclepius in Tricca features several other components characteristic of the cults of Trophonius and Amphiaraus, such as worship of a local patron, conspicuous chthonic elements, and elevation of the status of the personage from a mortal to a god.[294]

[289] *Vita Apollon.* 2. 37; cf. Sineux 2007: 120–2.

[290] Hamilton 1906; on incubation see Deubner 1900.

[291] Strabo 9. 5. 17; *IG* iv^2 1. 128: ll. 29–30; cf. Sineux 1999: 160; Aston 2004; cf. Nutton 2004: 105.

[292] Aristoph. *Plut.* 708–11; *IG* iv. 951, 954; cf. Edelstein and Edelstein 1948: 1, nos. 414–54.

[293] Aston 2004: 28–31.

[294] Ibid. 26. Grégoire 1949 was the first to discuss in detail the proximity of Asclepius, Trophonius, and Amphiaraus.

Finally, Asclepius had grottoes sacred to him, both natural and artificial.[295] In Athens the entrance of a natural cave with a spring was located in the rear wall of the Asclepiaeum, and in the fourth century there was a direct passage between the sanctuary's incubation hall and the cave.[296] At Lebena on Crete and in Corinth sanctuaries of Asclepius featured artificial grottoes housing sacred water springs.[297] At Cyphanta, in the Peloponnesus, Asclepius possessed a cave (*spêlaion*).[298] In his native Thessaly, at Pharsalus, Asclepius was worshipped in a cave Nymphaeum.[299] Although these grottoes did not serve as places of oracle-giving, they played an important role in the cult. The practice of catabasis at Tricca, the occurrence of grottoes at Asclepiaea, and the god's chthonic features hint at the possibility of Asclepius' ancient association with caves. However, his later cult appears to have preserved only meagre traces of this connection.

Aristaeus

Aristaeus, a hero of Thessalian origin, the son of Apollo and the Nymph Cyrene,[300] was made immortal by the Horae who fed him with nectar and ambrosia.[301] He grew up in Chiron's cave and learnt the art of medicine and divination from the Muses.[302] He was also called Agreus and Nomios,[303] sharing divine epithets with Apollo Agreus, Apollo Nomios, and Zeus Aristaeus.[304] Aristaeus cleansed the Cyclades of a plague: following his divine father's command, he erected an altar on a mountain on Ceos, and sacrificed to Zeus.[305] Aristaeus' connections with the divination are highlighted by his

[295] Graf 1990: 180–1.

[296] Wickens 1986: i. 187; ii. 329–32, cf. Xen. *Mem.* 3. 13. 3; Paus. 1. 21. 7.

[297] Graf 1990: 181.

[298] Paus. 3. 24. 2.

[299] Above, Ch. 2.1.

[300] Cook 1895: 9–11; Farnell 1907: 4: 124; Bolton, 1962: 167–9; Ustinova 2002: 277–8; Bonnechere 2003: 231; Liapis 2007: 404.

[301] Pind. *Pyth.* 9. 63–4.

[302] Apoll. Rhod. 2. 510–12.

[303] *Pyth.* 9. 65.

[304] Apoll. Rhod. 2. 506–7 with schol., Diod. 4. 81.

[305] Apoll. Rhod. 2. 518; Diod. 4. 82, cf. Philippson 1944: 148–9.

activities as a bee-keeper:[306] the second temple at Delphi was constructed of wax and feathers, and Trophonius' cave was discovered by the Boeotians following a swarm of bees.[307] Later Aristaeus joined Dionysus in Thrace, was initiated into the god's mysteries, finally vanished on Mt Haemus, and was thereupon honoured as a god by both the Thracians and the Greeks.[308] He was the object of heroic cults in Thessaly and in Boeotia, as well as in Arcadia and in Sicily.[309]

Zalmoxis[310]

The main achievement of Asclepius, the 'blameless physician',[311] was to render mortals immortal. In this respect, the mysterious cave-dwellers of Northern Greece are reminiscent of the Thracian underground daemons that were believed to bestow immortality and to heal.

In fact, Herodotus states on three occasions[312] that the Getae, 'the bravest and the most law-abiding of all Thracians', *athanatizousi,* that is, 'make themselves immortal'.[313] He records at length the views of the Getae on immortality, his account concentrating on the figure of Salmoxis (other authors name him Zalmoxis or Zamloxis).[314] Herodotus' information, Strabo's account of pious Thracians and their beliefs, as well as occasional references to Zalmoxis by other ancient authors and explanations of lexicographers, constitute the basis for a lively discussion of the subject by modern authors.[315]

[306] Ver. *Georg*. 4. 317–18; Ovid. *Pont*. 4. 2. 9; Athen 14. 643B. On the symbolism of bees and apiculture see Ch. 2.1.

[307] Delphi: Sourvinou-Inwood 1991: 196–200; Trophonius: see above, Ch. 2.3.

[308] Diod. 4. 82.

[309] Burkert 1983: 109–16; Lloyd-Jones 1990: 331–2.

[310] On Zalmoxis see Ustinova 2002. The Greek knowledge of Thracian beliefs on immortality is discussed in Ustinova (forthcoming).

[311] Hom. *Il.* 4. 405; 11. 518.

[312] 4. 93, 94; 5. 4.

[313] This translation is more accurate than 'pretend' or 'claim to be immortal' (e.g. in the Loeb translation of Herodotus by A. D. Goodley), see Linforth 1918; Pfister 1953: 1113; Eliade 1970: 31; cf. van der Ben 1985: 12: 'to hold oneself immortal'.

[314] Salmoxis in Herodotus; Zalmoxis in Plato, Diodorus, Apuleius, etc.; Zamolxis in Strabo, Lucian, Diogenes Laertius, etc. For the word and its etymology, obscure so far, see Kretschmer 1936: 43–7; Pfister 1953: 1113; Detschew 1957: s.v. Zalmoxis; von Fritz 1967: 2303; Eliade 1970: 44–7; Poghirc 1987: 195; Nasta 1980.

[315] Tomaschek 1893: 62–7; Rohde 1925: 263–5; Pfister 1953; Carpenter 1956: 112–35; Morrison 1956: 139–41; Dodds 1973: 144; Wiesner 1963: 84; von Fritz 1967; Russu 1967; Eliade 1970: 21–75; Bianchi 1971; Burkert 1972: 156–159; Crişan 1978: 228–32.

According to Herodotus, the Getae believed that they did not die, but went to a *daimôn* Zalmoxis. The Greeks who lived near Hellespontus and the Pontus claimed that Zalmoxis had been Pythagoras' slave.[316] On his return home to Thrace, he built a hall (*andreôn*), feasted there with the most prominent of his countrymen, and imparted to them that he, they, and their descendants would not die, but would go to a place where they would live forever having all good things. Zalmoxis then built himself an underground chamber (*katagaion oikêma*), and descended into it for three years, mourned by the Thracians. In the fourth year he returned to them, persuading them of the truth of the story of his death and resurrection.[317]

Herodotus further reports that every four years the Getae send a messenger to Zalmoxis,[318] by hurling him onto sharp spear points. While the man is still alive, they charge him with the message. If he is killed, they think that he is favoured by the god; if he survives, they blame him as unworthy of the honourable task. The story of Zalmoxis' return in the fourth year and the messengers' missions are closely connected: the messenger summons the god every fourth year to a ritual, which supposedly renders the worshippers immortal.[319]

Plato discusses Zalmoxis in the *Charmides*,[320] and introduces a new element into the story: Thracian methods of healing. Socrates talks about the medical approaches current in his days, and praises magic methods which he ascribes to the Thracians:

[316] Herodotus' account derives perhaps from a work of his contemporary Damastes of Sigeum on the Hellespontus. The same well-informed source, one of 'the Greeks who lived near Hellespontus and the Pontus', was probably used by Iamblichus, whose *Life of Pythagoras* contains an almost direct quotation from a account of Zalmoxis' activities, more detailed than that of Herodotus (Morrison 1956: 139–41).

[317] This story is reminiscent of the rites which Orpheus introduced in Leibethra: he assembled his warriors in a special building and performed there all-male secret ceremonies, which enraged the Thracian women and ultimately led to his death (Conon, *FGH* 32 F 1.45). The accounts of the activities of both Zalmoxis and Orpheus share several common topics: exclusively male rites, held in special men's houses (*andreia*), initiations into mysteries dealing with blissful post-existence, expertise in music and sorcery, and Thracian origin (cf. Graf and Johnston 2007: 172).

[318] Cf. Pfister 1953: 1114–15.

[319] Burkert 1972: 157.

[320] 156D–157B. For a discussion of the whole passage, see van der Ben 1985: 11–19. For its place in the Platonic theory of soul, see Hazebroucq 1997: 108–23; Claus 1981: 170–2; Robinson 2000: 39.

I learnt it (the charm) on campaign over there, from one of the Thracian physicians of Zalmoxis who are said to make themselves immortal (*apathanatizein*).[321] This Thracian said that the Greeks were right in advising as I told you just now: 'but Zalmoxis,' he said, 'our king, who is a god, says that as you ought not to attempt to cure eyes without head, or head without body, so you should not treat body without soul . . .' (Translation W. R. M. Lamb.)

Strabo gives his own version of the legend of Zalmoxis, whom he calls Zamolxis.[322] After having been Pythagoras' slave, Zalmoxis arrived in the country of the Getae, and impressed them with his mantic talents. He became the king's co-regent, and the priest of the most revered god of the Getae. Later, Zalmoxis was declared a god. He lived alone in a cavernous place (*antrôdes ti chôrion*),[323] seen only by the king and his own attendants. The cave, as well as the mountain where it was located, became sacred, and from then on the Getae always had such a councillor to the king, whom they deemed divine. Strabo also mentions that, when Byrebistas struggled against Julius Caesar, the role of the divine priest and king's councillor was fulfilled by the sorcerer Decaeneus.[324]

Strabo associates his tale of Zalmoxis with a description of unusual customs of the Mysians, who are in his opinion of Thracian stock.[325] Mysians, called 'pious' (*theosebeis*) and 'fire-walkers' (*kapnobatai*), are idealized as a virtuous people of vegetarians, whose piety impels them to practise vegetarianism and abstain from eating meat, marriage, and military endeavours.[326] Thus, 'Pythagorean' vegetarian customs introduced by Zalmoxis were still preserved in Strabo's time.

[321] The verb (*apathanatizein*, rather than more common *athanatizein*) emphasizes the cultic action performed in order to make one immortal (Linforth 1918: 22–3; Bianchi 1971: 232).

[322] Strabo 7. 3. 5.

[323] Here, as well as in Herodotus' testimony, there can be no doubt that Zalmoxis' abode is subterranean. Burkert's (1972: 159) assumption that Strabo and Herodotus meant that Zalmoxis lived *on* the holy mountain remains ungrounded.

[324] *Goês anêr*, Strabo 7. 3. 5. For Byrebistas and Decaeneus, see Eliade 1970: 57–61; Vulpe 1976: 62–8. It is assumed that underground galleries discovered in the depth of Belena Hill (Ruse district), on top of which the Borovo Treasure had been found, and the underground complex near the village Karan Vărbovka may have served as dwellings of Thracian priests (Zdravkova and Ivanov 1990). However, the chambers (2.50–2.80 m in diameter and 1.00–1.70 m in height) are too small to allow prolonged human habitation.

[325] 7. 3. 2–3.

[326] Dacian asceticism was so famous that Josephus Flavius appears to compare the abstemious Dacians with the Essenes (*Ant. Jud.* 18. 22). For the controversy on this

We see that the Thracians in general, and among them the Getae in particular, worshipped Zalmoxis, apparently a god or a daemon, whose high priest-king was probably considered his substitute on earth. Zalmoxis endowed his priests with the power of healing, and they were known as physicians (*iatroi*). The *interpretatio Graeca* of Thracian ideas on immortality demonstrates that the cult of Zalmoxis involved a belief in a blissful post-existence, and certain initiatory rites: in fact, Hellanicus[327] calls the rites introduced by Zalmoxis initiations (*teletê*).

By the fifth century, Zalmoxis' vegetarian injunctions, his catabasis, and above all the doctrine of immortality had induced the Pontic Greeks to link him with Pythagoras. The latter's mantic abilities, magical healing, and other extraordinary traits[328] facilitated the comparison between the Greek sage and the Thracian daemon. The association of Zalmoxis with Pythagoras may also have been inspired by the similarity between the activities of the Pythagorean companionship, comprising meetings and meals in the common hall (*sunedrion*) and elaborate initiations, and the feasts of Getan nobles in their *andreôn*.[329]

The myth of Zalmoxis' descent into an underground chamber or a cave and his priest's habitation of such a cave evince the existence of a cultic phenomenon similar to those attested to Boeotia and Thessaly. However, in Thrace the daemon's presence in his cave was conceived and staged in naturalistic form. The Thracians did not encounter the deity in dreams or in a trance, as in Tricca, Lebadeia, and Oropus; for them, the deity's representative was alive on earth, dwelling in a cave, but was almost invisible, that is, seen only by the king and a few attendants. The Thracian institutions seem to have preserved archaic traits which were already extinct in Greece.[330]

passage see Lozovan 1968: 219–28. For these groups, see Eliade 1970: 61–7; Bianchi 1971: 233; Crişan 1978: 235–6; Banu 1980; Popov 1982. For Getic religious devotion, see Pfister 1953: 1119. Burkert 1972: 162 compares *kapnobatai* with the *aithrobates* Abaris (Porph. *Vita Pyth.* 29), and considers them genuine shamans. An exact parallel to *kapnobatai* is the ancient Indian designation of Brahmans as *dhūma-gati*, current already in the *Mahābhārata* (Poghirc 1987: 196). Popov 1982 suggests that *kapnobatai* belonged to a caste separated from the rest of the population by requirements of ritual purity.

[327] *FGH* 4. F73. [328] See below, Ch. 4.2.

[329] Morrison 1956: 150. [330] Ibid. 140.

It is difficult to distinguish clearly between the Thracian cult proper and its Greek interpretation.[331] However, several points may be put forward. It is important that the mythological divine prophet, endowed with supreme wisdom, lived in a cave. His venerable successors also led extremely secluded lives, confined to the same cave, their wisdom originating perhaps in mystical revelations. Further, the fire-walking Mysians, associated with Zalmoxis, most probably followed a way of life similar to that of modern yogis, which involves extreme asceticism and practice of deep trance. The healing skills of Zalmoxis' priests are reminiscent of the abilities of medicine men (shamans) and other religious practitioners who derive their power from altered states of consciousness. Finally, the Thracian lack of fear of death reported by Herodotus is perfectly congruent with the positive attitude to death of people who have experienced various mystical states.[332]

Rhesus[333]

When the Muse, the mother of the Thracian king Rhesus slain at Troy, learns about his death, she predicts that, although she will never see her son again, he will live, hidden in a cavern, a spirit in human form (*anthrôpodaimôn*).[334] This description is strongly reminiscent of Zalmoxis.[335] The Muse calls her son a cousin and a friend of Orpheus, and compares Rhesus with a Thracian prophet of Bacchus, 'revered as a god by those who know (the truth)'.[336]

[331] Hartog's radical approach, making 'Salmoxisme' a copy of 'Pythagorisme' (Hartog 1978: 35), exaggerates this problem.

[332] Discussed in Ch. 1.

[333] For the cults of Rhesus, Thracian and Greek, see Ustinova 2002: 282; Liapis 2007.

[334] Eurip. *Rhes.* 962–73. For the controversy on the date of the play, see Geffcken 1936, proposing the 4th cent.; Ritchie 1964, proposing 437 as terminus ante quem.

[335] Nock 1926.

[336] Eur. *Rhes.* 944, 966, 972–3; cf. Perdizet 1910: 16, 27–8; Leaf 1915: 6. For an analysis of these verses, see Nock 1926; Linforth 1941: 61–7; Plichon 2001: 17–18; Liapis 2007: 395. Diggle 1994 proposes a conjecture (*hos ge* instead of *hôste*), which implies that the Muse, rather than comparing Rhesus to an anonymous prophet of Dionysus, defines him as a prophet of Bacchus, who took the mountain as his abode. An oracle of Dionysus was in fact located in the land of the Satrae, who owned the mines of Mt Pangaeum (Her. 7. 111–12).

The Muse's prediction regarding Rhesus' exceptional future, namely that his soul would be released by Persephone,[337] is uttered in a monologue on the mysteries of the Two Goddesses, Demeter and Persephone. However, the initiates in the Eleusinian mysteries were never promised that their life would continue in an underground shelter.[338] Similar to the case of Zalmoxis discussed above, the hint of Rhesus' role in mystery rites may indicate the Greeks regarded Thracian initiations as comparable to the Greek mysteries. The Thracian king's destiny as foreseen by the Muse is reminiscent of the story of Amphiaraus and Trophonius, who were concealed under the earth by the gods and thus saved from disgrace and death. The word *anthrôpodaimôn*[339] and a comparison to a prophet imply that in the eyes of Euripides Rhesus enjoyed a status 'in between' a man and a deity. The poet used the hybrid word and the allusion to the Eleusinian mysteries in order to render the strange phenomenon of a mortal's[340] subterranean existence comprehensible to his Athenian audience.

The comparison with the Bacchus' prophet suggests that Rhesus' abode on Mt Pangaeus may have functioned as an oracle.[341] Thus, as divine kings and prophets living below the earth, Rhesus and Zalmoxis represent the same pattern of religious thinking; Zalmoxis was the tribal deity of the Getae, whereas Rhesus was the patron of the Edonians.[342] The subterranean residence of this hero, considered a healer and a saviour, was explained in an aetiological myth. Only its Greek version has reached us, but it is plausible that Thracians had their own legend of Rhesus, alongside the story of Zalmoxis.

[337] V. 965.

[338] Cf. Plichon 2001: 15. This consideration alone provides a sufficient reason to reject Leaf's theory that the aim of the *Rhesus* was to invent a mythical link between the Thracian hero and the Eleusinian mysteries, hence, between the hero and Athens. For Rhesus' association with the Thracian mysteries see Liapis 2007: 397. For the discussion of Greek mystery cults see Ch. 5.2.

[339] On this *hapax* see Plichon 2001: 14–16.

[340] In fact, the description of Rhesus' shining golden armour and majestic horses in the *Iliad* (10. 435–45, 545–50) and in the *Rhesus* (300–9) hints at the divinity of the Thracian king (Wathelet 1989: 227, 230–1; Liapis 2007: 381). For a discussion of Rhesus' mythology, see Borgeaud 1991; Liapis 2007.

[341] Cf. Liapis 2007: 397.

[342] Rohde 1925: 143, Liapis 2007: 396–7. It is supposed that some Thracian tombs were places of cult of noble ancestors worshipped as *anthrôpodaimones* (Theodossiev 2000: 436).

Orpheus on Lesbos

A myth maintained that during the Trojan War the Greeks consulted an oracle on Lesbos, where Orpheus prophesied from the depths of the earth.[343] Jealous of Orpheus' fame, Apollo replaced him on the island, and was later worshipped as Apollo *Murikaios*, of the tamarisk, the epiclesis ensuing from divination by tamarisk rod practised on the island.[344] Orpheus' ancient oracle on Lesbos, more popular than the oracles of Claros, Gryneion, and Delphi, as well as Apollo's jealousy, are described in detail only by a late second–third-century AD author Philostratus: after the Thracian women tore Orpheus apart, his head drifted to Lesbos, where it took up residence in a fissure (*rhêgma*) and uttered oracles from a cavity in the earth (*en koilêi têi gêi*); even Cyrus the Great received a prediction there.[345] Orpheus' oracle on Lesbos is also mentioned in some earlier texts, most notably by Conon (late first century BC–early first century AD), who refers to its location near the city of Antissa.[346] Antissa was destroyed in 167, which most probably implies that the demise of the oracle is to be dated to the same time.[347]

A much more ancient visual testimony is provided by an Attic red-figure hydria, dated to 440, which features a scene of consultation at this oracle.[348] The consulter stands above a cleft on a rock, Orpheus'

[343] Philoch. (*FGH* 328 F77, Schol. Eur. Alc. 968); Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 1. 134; Kern 1922: fr. 332; Guthrie 1952: 35–8; Lebrun 1990: 186; Picard 1922: 460, 465, Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: iii. 262; Faraone 2005: 275; Liapis 2007: 399. I. Linforth maintains that the story of Orpheus' singing voice was too widespread to prove the existence of an oracle on Lesbos (Linforth 1941: 129–33). Lesbos as an important oracular centre is probably mentioned (as Lazpa) in a Hittite text: Lebrun 1990: 186.

[344] Apollo's cult as *Myrikaios* on Lesbos was mentioned by Alcaeus, cited in the scholion on Nikander's *Theriaka* 613a9. The scholiast compares this practice with the rhabdomancy current in Scythia and Persia, the latter practices attested to by other authorities: Her. 4. 67 (Ustinova 1999: 76). The expertise of the scholiast in rhabdomancy renders his reference to this rite on Lesbos quite reliable, notwithstanding Halliday's reservations (1913: 227).

[345] *Heroicus* 28. 7 (172); *Vita Apoll.* 4. 14. For prophetic disembodied heads, see Chadwick 1942: 10, 50; Linforth 1941: 134–6; Ogden 2001: 208–10; Compton 2006: 263.

[346] *FGH* 26 F1; cf. Philostr. *Vita Apoll.* 4. 14.

[347] Faraone 2004: 7.

[348] Garezou 1994: no. 68; Ogden 2001: fig. 15; Faraone 2004: 9, fig. 1. Cf. Guthrie 1952: 35–6 and pl. 5. Garezou 1994: no. 70, Guthrie 1952: fig. 7: a 5th-cent. cylix

head below his feet. In his hand the enquirer holds ropes, which served presumably for descent into the cleft. Muses are portrayed on both sides of the consulter and Orpheus' head.

The seat of the oracle of Orpheus' head seems to consist of two cavities, a larger hollow, where the consulters descended, and a smaller one, located within the larger cave.[349] If this reconstruction is correct, the layout of the oracle on Lesbos was similar to the design of two famous oracles. In the shrine of Trophonius at Lebadeia, the consulter had to descend into a larger grotto, and then into a smaller orifice, whereas the Delphic adyton comprised a larger sunken chamber, where the Pythia's tripod was placed, and a fissure in the bedrock beneath it.[350]

On Lesbos ancient or legendary practice of inspired prophecy, delivered from the bowels of the earth, was superseded by the formal art of divination by rods or sticks (rhabdomancy). The primeval procedure ascribed to Orpheus' cavern on Lesbos appears to have been very similar to the customary course of action in the cave of Trophonius during the historical period. One cannot escape the impression that the oracle on Lesbos was attributed to Orpheus because of his origin: it must have seemed natural to credit a Thracian with predictions from the depths of a cave. The question whether this divinatory practice was brought to Lesbos from Thrace, or was an indigenous institution, associated with the foreign hero because of popular opinions of Thracian customs, remains unanswered.

It is also noteworthy that the head of the archetypal singer Orpheus uttered prophecy rather than poetry. On the one hand, this detail may hint at certain artificiality in the connection drawn between the oracle and its foundation myth, which is reminiscent of similar contrived connections between the myth and cult of Trophonius and Amphiaraus. On the other hand, the prophesying head of the bard is an embodiment of the primeval unity of poetry and prophecy already mentioned above. I will return to this subject in Chapter 3.

featuring a person writing on tablets in front of severed head, Apollo standing behind it, the scene probably depicting uttering predictions by Orpheus' head. Orpheus' head uttering prophecy appears also in Etruscan art, on a mirror and some funerary urns (Guitard 2004: 36, fig. 4; Guthrie 1952: 36; cf. Gantz 1993: 725), and on a number of ancient gems (Guthrie 1952: 36–8, fig. 8).

[349] Ogden 2001: 208.

[350] See below, Ch. 2.5.

To recapitulate, a number of myths relate how various figures did not perish beneath the earth either because they were immortal or due to the will of the gods. A combination of mythological and historical evidence on the cults of subterranean dwellers and their biographies reveals a pattern based on a series of common features. While rarely substantiated in full, these traits can provide a basis for attribution of several phenomena to the same mytho-cultic type.

In most cases these characters either act as healers and purifiers during their lifetime, or deliver oracular responses on medical matters after their death. Some of these daemons were believed not only to possess healing powers, but also to bestow immortality on people or their souls. Occasionally, episodes in the mythic biographies of subterranean daemons suggest other magic and cultic activities. In several cases initiation ceremonies are either explicitly mentioned or hinted at.

Aetiological legends on disappearances into chasms, caves, and subterranean chambers vary from place to place, but in most cases vanishing into a chasm is a divine blessing, granted to a mortal hero to save him from imminent death or disgrace, and rendering him immortal.[351] The problem is not 'that cult *aition* has been confused with cult', as A. Schachter assumes.[352] These tales look like explanations invented to account for the daemon's life in the depth of the earth: myths that give reasons for an ancient cult type.[353] Two elements are distinctive, the daemons' immortality and their subterranean existence.[354]

[351] In this respect, these figures obviously differ from personages hurled into the underground world as a punitive measure. In Archaic poetry, Tartarus is a place of confinement for immortals only: Titans are actually imprisoned there, while the gods are threatened by Zeus that they would be punished for lack of obedience by being hurled into Tartarus. Human wrongdoers are penalized elsewhere. See Hes. *Theog.* 713–45, 851; Hom. *Il.* 8. 478–81, 14. 203, 14. 273–9, 15. 225, cf. Gantz 1993: 1, 44, 128–9. Tartarus becomes a place of punishment for human transgressors no earlier than in Plato's *Gorgias* (523B), see Gantz 1993: i. 131.

[352] Schachter 1981–94: iii. 71.

[353] Rohde 1925: 93. Legends about holy people who live in the depths of mountain caves are attested to throughout Eurasia and even America, and must have developed independently (ibid. 106).

[354] These daemons are confined to the place of their worship. The sanctuaries of Amphiaraus and Trophonius were in the vicinity of their respective *poleis*; Asclepius, the only one among these characters promoted to the rank of a panhellenic god, had an ancient oracle in his native Tricca, whereas Zalmoxis and Rhesus, living inside the mountains sacred to them, were presumably patrons of Thracian tribes. Thus, each of them was a master of the land, deep inside which his abode was hidden, and they were not, as Schachter assumes (1981–94: iii. 71) avatars of the same god, whose original name had been forgotten, and who was given different names in each of his sanctuaries.

The immortality of these characters is of a very peculiar kind. They are not transferred to Elysion or to the Olympus, but stay forever in the place where the earth swallowed them, and they never again appear in the realm of the living unless in a dream or revelation on this place.[355] Their status is that of extreme liminality: they belong neither to the living nor to the dead nor to the gods. Thus, they are able to act as mediators between the worlds, disclosing to the living secret knowledge normally confined to the dead or to the gods. The strange mode of life under the earth stems from the function of the subterranean daemons as revealers of the hidden truth to men: these figures were needed to explain the practice of catabasis into caves and grottoes.

We are fortunate to have a description of the mystic revelations experienced in the Trophonium, evidently resulting from alterations in the state of consciousness of the enquirer. Regrettably, this detailed account is the exception to the rule: testimony on other oracular centres consists of indirect allusions or brief hints as to altered states of consciousness experienced by consulters or personnel. However, the evidence on the Trophonium suggests that, under similar conditions, namely cultic preparations, isolation inside a cave, and religious awe, ancient Greek consulters would have attained similar experiences and interpreted them in a similar way.

The baffling status of the immortal subterranean daemons who do not fit into any of the usual Greek categories, and the artificial provision of mythical explanations of their cults focusing on prophecy and initiations, suggest that it was the firm connection to the caves and underground chambers that constituted the core of the cult. This core, revelation of hidden knowledge in a cave, could not be changed; it had therefore to be explained and preserved.

4. APOLLO SHINING IN THE DARK

Claros

The sanctuary of Claros is situated near the city of Colophon. It flourished and boasted of being the favourite of Apollo in the seventh–sixth

[355] Rohde 1925: 91.

centuries, when the Homeric hymns were composed.[356] The place was associated with prophecy from a very early date. The contest between two famous mythological seers, Mopsus, son of Manto and grandson of Tiresias, and Calchas, took place at Claros.[357]

Archaic remains discovered in Claros are too sparse to enable a reconstruction of the temple, whereas the layout of the Hellenistic temple is quite comprehensible. Numerous inscriptions, not only from Claros, but from all over the Mediterranean, attest to the popularity of this oracle during the Hellenistic period and especially under the Roman Empire.[358] The temple was destroyed by an earthquake in late antiquity.[359]

The mantic session at Claros was held in a grotto.[360] The diviner had to abstain from food for a day and a night before descending into the underground chamber, where he drank from the sacred source.[361] The procedure took place at night and included 'numerous ceremonies'.[362] Most enquirers seem to have awaited a response in the temple: Tacitus says that the prophesying priest heard only the names of the enquirers, apparently leaving them behind when he descended into the grotto. A few were honoured to enter the grotto together with the prophet and the priests.

During the first and the second centuries AD some of the *theopropoi,* delegates sent by their cities to the oracular god, underwent initiations, in order, as it seems, to be admitted to the inner chambers, originally reserved exclusively for the priest and the medium. Several second-century AD inscriptions refer to consulters who were 'received' or 'celebrated the mysteries'; they were allowed to 'step in' (*embateuein*).[363]

The personnel of the temple included a prophet (*prophêtês*) and a secretary who were appointed for a year, as well as a priest and

[356] *H. Ap.* 40; *H. Artem.* 5.

[357] Paus. 7. 3. 1; Strabo 14. 1. 27; Picard 1922: 107.

[358] Robert 1967: 306–8; Bean 1979: 156; Busine 2005: 32–54, 59–69. For the responses given at Claros see Merkelbach and Stauber 1996.

[359] Bean 1979: 157.

[360] Tac. *Ann.* 2. 54, Plin. *Hist. Nat.* 2. 232.

[361] Iamb. *De myst.* 3. 11; Tac. *Ann.* 3. 54; Robert 1967; Parke 1985: 219–24; Busine 2002, 2005: 48.

[362] Iamb. *De myst.* 3. 11.

[363] Picard 1922: 303–5; Robert 1967: 310; Graf 2003: 246; see also below, Ch. 5.2.

a *thespiôdos* ('inspired singer') who held their offices for a long period or for life. It is likely therefore that it was the *thespiôdos* who served as an inspired medium, this function demanding special personality traits, and that the prophet only rendered them in verse.[364]

The medium at Claros distanced himself from ordinary mortals. According to Iamblichus, he withdrew from everyday affairs, and prepared for possession by the god. The strain of prophesying was considerable: Pliny notes that drinking from the sacred pool inspires wonderful oracles, but shortens the life of the drinker. The life-shortening factor was most probably not the sacred water alone, but the whole lifestyle of the medium, comprising seclusion, purifications, fasting, and other austerities, and indeed the strain of possession by the god.[365]

The history of exploration of Claros is very similar to that of Delphi. The prophetic grotto there was described as *specus*,[366] which could mean either a natural or an artificial cavern. For several decades researchers sought for a natural cave[367] before L. Robert discovered and excavated the temple of Apollo in Claros and exposed the artificial grotto in its basement, fully preserved.[368] Nevertheless, even before Robert's discovery, the ancient accounts of the procedure were not dismissed by scholars as untrustworthy because they conformed with the philosophic outlook of their authors: for instance, the Neoplatonist Iamblichus accompanies his description of the mantic séance at Claros with a philosophic discourse on the interaction between the divine

[364] Robert 1967: 310. Bouché-Leclerq demonstrates that *thespiôdos* belongs to the category of mediums, 'instruments of revelation' (Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: i. 351). Most other scholars ascribe the function of the medium to *prophêtês*, and that of rendering the utterance in verse to *thespiôdos* (Picard 1922: 208–13; Bean 1979: 159; Parke 1967*a*: 139; 1985: 220–3; Aune 1983: 31; Burkert 1985: 115; Merkelbach and Stauber 1996: 3; Georgoudi 1998: 352).

[365] Plin. *Hist. Nat.* 2. 232; Iamb. *De myst.* 3. 11. Drinking water could be lethal for prophets: the legend of the seer Teiresias, who died after having drunk water from the spring of Telphusa (Paus. 9. 33. 1; Apollod. 3. 7. 3), may reflect this belief. Teiresias' demise epitomizes two ideas: that death brings about the ultimate revelation, and that the strain of prophesying may kill. On divination séances as painful ordeals and on death as the way to the divine wisdom see above, Introduction.

[366] Tac. *Ann.* 2. 54; Plin. *Hist. Nat.* 2. 232.

[367] Picard 1922: 66.

[368] Robert 1967: 309–10, fig. 117; Bean 1979: 158–9; Parke 1985: 138; Wujewski 2001; Ferrary 2005.

presence in the sacred water and the human instrument of divination. The reliance of modern scholars on ancient sources in the case of Claros presents a striking contrast to the prevailing disbelief in ancient accounts of Delphi, as we will see shortly.

The underground adyton comprises two chambers with a passage between them. Constructed in the Hellenistic period, it was modified in the late first century BC: the ceiling was turned into vaults, and the second chamber diminished.[369] All the spaces in this subterranean complex were about 1.8 m high. The corridor which led to the first chamber, about 70 cm wide, was 25 m long. On the way to the subterranean vault, it changed direction seven times. In the underground darkness, this intricate passage must have given the impression of a maze.[370] At its end, it split into two branches, creating two entrances into the outer chamber of the grotto. This chamber was more than 6 m deep; it contained a half-egg of blue marble, obviously an imitation of the Delphic omphalos, as well as benches for the priests, and a separate seat near the passage into the innermost chamber. Through this vaulted passage, 2.7 m long, the medium proceeded into the inner chamber, which was 3.7 m deep. Water was originally collected in the furthest end of this chamber, separated by a sort of a parapet; after the reconstruction it was drained into a hollow in the pavement, into which water from the plain penetrated and sometimes flooded the prophetic grotto.[371]

The inspired medium alone entered the innermost sanctum, invisible to those present at the ceremony.[372] Influenced by his faith, the long passage through the maze, and by purifications he had undergone before entering the grotto, the *thespiôdos* drank the sacred water and started singing. The prophet remained in the outer chamber, seated on the separate stone at the entrance to the passage into the inner vault, and recorded the utterances he heard.[373] In modern terms, at Claros the medium attained altered state of consciousness due to the effect of his descent into the underground grotto, enhanced by earlier preparations.

[369] Wujewski 2001: 106–13, figs. 11–13.
[370] Robert 1967: 311; Wujewski 2001: fig. 9.
[371] Robert 1967: 311.
[372] Iamb. *De myst.* 3. 11.
[373] Robert 1967: 312.

Ptoion

The sanctuary of Apollo Ptoios is located on a steep slope of Mt Ptoion in Boeotia.[374] It rises in a series of terraces. On the highest terrace there is a natural spring; on the next terrace down stood the temple. Behind the temple was a small artificial grotto, and water was conveyed there by a channel from the spring. In the late 1930s, the grotto was about 4 m long, high and wide enough for one person to enter it comfortably, but in antiquity it must have been several metres longer, as P. Guillon's photos of its partially collapsed entrance indicate; at present, the grotto is only about a metre and a half deep.[375]

This complex is dated to the late fourth–early third century,[376] the earliest constructions of the sanctuary belong however to the sixth century, and the most ancient votive inscription, mentioning Apollo Ptoios, is on a statue of a kore from the third quarter of the seventh century.[377] The sanctuary was so popular during the Archaic age that it received no less than 120 statues of kouroi as offerings, whereas the rest of the Greek world yielded about 160 kouroi.[378]

The site has a long history predating the seventh century, when the first evidence of Apollo's cult is recorded.[379] In an adjacent sanctuary, a hero Ptoios and a goddess were worshipped, and it is likely that this pair was suppressed by Apollo and Athena Pronoia. They replaced the original tenants of the sanctuary on Mt Ptoion, and the local mythology reacted accordingly, making Ptoios the son of Apollo.[380]

The importance of the cavern at Ptoion is emphasized in Pindar's lines dedicated to this sanctuary, cited by Strabo:

[374] For a synopsis of ancient sources see Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: iii. 214–17; Guillon 1943: 92–5; descriptions of the site: Schachter 1981–94: i. 58–64; Touloupa 1973.

[375] Frazer 1898: comm. to Paus. 9. 13; Guillon 1943: 96; 137, 140, pl. 14. I visited Ptoion in July 2007 and explored its ruins.

[376] Guillon 1943: 137.

[377] Schachter 1967: 1.

[378] Ducat 1971: 451.

[379] Starting from the late Neolithic, Schachter 1967: 1; cf. Ducat 1971: 439.

[380] Paus. 9. 23. 6; Steph. Byz., s.v. *Akraiphia.* Guillon 1943: 99–144, comparing this pattern to that of Delphi. Béquignon 1949: 68–70 and Schachter 1967: 3; 1981–94: i. 5–58; iii. 11–21 accept this view; cf. Ducat 1971: 439–44.

He [Teneros] was the son of Apollo and Melia, and was a prophet of the oracle on the Ptoüs Mountain, which the same poet [Pindar] calls three-peaked: 'and once he took possession of the three-peaked hollow (*keuthmôn*) of Ptoüs.' And he calls Tenerus 'temple-minister (*vaopolos*), prophet (*mantis*), called by the same name as the plains.' The Ptoüs lies above the Teneric Plain and Lake Copais near Acraephium. Both the oracle and the mount belong to the Thebans. (Translation H. L. Jones.)[381]

Herodotus recounts the story of the consultation of the oracle by Mys in the early fifth century: the prophet (called *promantis* and *prophêtês*) gave his response in the enquirer's presence, and in the Carian language. Whatever language he really used,[382] it is clear that the prophet's words could be recorded. Most significant, he appears to have acted by direct inspiration, probably induced by entering the cavern and drinking the sacred water.[383] The identification by the Persian enquirers of the prophet's language as Carian, which he could hardly have known, also hints at his ecstatic state: the frantic performance in the local Boeotian dialect was perhaps so confusing that to the foreigners it sounded like Carian.

[381] Strabo 9. 2. 34; Pind. fr. 51b Maehler. Pindar composed for Ptoion this hymn, and perhaps also a paean: Ducat 1971: 446. Elsewhere (Pind. *Paian* 9. 34; Paus. 9. 10. 5) Teneros is usually connected with another Boeotian oracle, at the Theban Ismenion. Pindar, a Boeotian, who knew local mythology well, seems to have introduced the version of the myth whereby the Theban hero was the patron of Mt Ptoion instead of Ptoios, thus providing endorsement for the hegemony of Thebes (Guillon 1943: 118). Teneros therefore was connected in myth to both oracles. For our purposes, the most important point in the cited fragment from Pindar is the prominence of the cavern on the mountain. In addition to their geographical proximity, the two oracles share several features: both are very ancient, their earliest epigraphic evidence being of the 7th cent. (Schachter 1967: 1–3), both belong since the 6th century to Apollo and Athena Pronaia, both are rich in tripods (Pind. *Pyth.* 11. 4–5; Paus. 9. 10. 4; Guillon 1943: 118–44), both were often consulted by the same people (Her. 8. 134) or on the same occasions (Paus. 4. 32. 5). Several methods of divination were used at the Ismenion (Schachter 1967: 4), including perhaps inspired prophecy, attested to by hexameter responses given by the prophet there (Plut. *Lys.* 29).

[382] Her. 8. 135, cf. Pus. 9. 23. 6, Plut. *Mor.* 411F. For discussion of the language see Robert 1950; Laumonier 1958: 23; Schachter 1981–94: i. 66. The existence of male prophets is confirmed in a series of inscriptions discovered on the site and dating from the 4th cent. BC to the 3rd cent. AD: *IG* vii. 1795, 1672, 2723, 2724, 3207, 4135, 4138, 4142, 4147, 4155; cf. Schachter 1967: 2; 1981–94: i. 67. How many people attended ordinary consultations, and whether all the responses were recorded, remains unclear (Ducat 1971: 447).

[383] Schachter 1967: 2; Guillon 1943: 22.

An early third-century hexameter inscription on a base of a statue dedicated to Apollo Ptoios[384] provides valuable information on the mantic procedure at the sanctuary:

> Ptoios of the golden hair, prophetic (god), to you, Apollo,
> Aristichus son of Pastrophus erected your image.
> But you, having accepted it, according to the promise you gave me in the darkness,
> When you uttered your words (in response) to my voice and smiled,[385]
> Be truthful to me and my ancestors,
> Give me in exchange the fulfillment of the good oracle.

Aristichus, the dedicant, calls Apollo Ptoios 'nocturnal' (*ennuchos*), which may either refer to the darkness inside the prophetic vault[386] or mean that the consultation took place at night.[387] The god spoke to Aristichus, and the contact between them was not mediated by one of temple personnel. It is unlikely that Aristichus incubated in the temple, saw the god in a dream, and later related the contents of the dream to other people. Moreover, we have no evidence of a mode of divination other than by direct inspiration at Ptoion. Thus, it is more plausible that the 'nocturnal' god appeared to Aristichus in the gloomy grotto, and inspired his revelation. If the inscription depicts a prophetic séance focused on a prophet, the dedicant, who had seen the god smiling at him, is probably the prophet himself. Personal offerings are exceptional at Ptoion, which makes the dedication of this statue a unique act.[388] The allusion to the ancestors suggests that the office was perhaps hereditary in one or several families. In any event, the contact between the god and the mortal at Ptoion is pictured as a direct encounter, the communication including not only auditory, but also visual messages.[389]

Thus, the oracular shrine of Apollo at Ptoion comprised an artificial grotto, and it is probable that the god appeared to his mouthpiece, the male prophet, inside this grotto. It seems that the prophet attained his

[384] Guillon 1943: 109–10, 144; 1946; cf. Schachter 1981–94: i. 67.

[385] ... *Ta moi ennuchos autos hupeschou / Phônên phthegxamenos pros emên opa prosgelasas te*...

[386] Guillon 1943: 146; Guillon 1946: 218–22.

[387] Schachter 1967: 2.

[388] Guillon 1943: 145. [389] Ibid., 1946.

visions in an ecstatic state, which affected his articulation, at least on some occasions.

Delos

A cave oracle of Apollo was perhaps active on Delos. The Homeric hymn to Apollo mentions the foundation of an oracle of the god on the island sacred to Apollo, Artemis, and Leto; this oracle reappears several hundred years later in a number of texts.[390] It is probable therefore that the oracle founded during the Archaic period was later eclipsed by the great sanctuary of Apollo and Artemis.

On the summit of Mt Cynthos, a grotto with a man-made facade was discovered. Excavations of the site, which yielded a base of a statue, a cylindrical altar, marble offering tables, and an omphalos, demonstrate that the grotto served as a little shrine,[391] presumably belonging to Apollo; the omphalos hints at divination rites performed there. The shrine was probably regarded as a seat of Apollo's oracle, at least in late antiquity: in fact, it fits the description of the Delian oracular shrine as of very simple construction by a fourth-century AD rhetorician Himerius.[392]

Thrace

Apollo *Phôleutêrios* makes his appearance on a third-century BC marble stele, discovered in 1973 in Histria, a Milesian colony on the Thracian Black Sea coast.[393] The word *Phôleutêrios* is unique, and its meaning and cultic connotations are still debated.

The inscription contains only two words, *Apollônos Phôleutêriou*, and was discovered out of its original context. Since the inscription is very laconic, covers the upper part of the stone only, and since its bottom was left unwrought, it served perhaps not as a dedication, but

[390] *H. Ap.* 1. 80; Lucian. *Bis accus.* 1; Himer. *Orat.* 18. 1; Max. Tyr. 41. 1; Steph. Byz. s.v. *Delos*; Farnell 1907: iv. 223; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 545.

[391] Plassart 1928: 228–47.

[392] Himer. *Orat.* 18. 1; Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: iii. 37; Farnell 1907: iv. 223; Picard 1922: 67.

[393] *ISM* i. 105, cf. Pippidi 1984: 266–7.

rather as a marking-stone of the precinct belonging to the god.[394] If that was the case, and Apollo Pholeuterios possessed a sanctuary in Histria, he must have been one of the important gods of the city pantheon.

Some scholars are reluctant to tackle the riddle of the epiclesis of Apollo Pholeuterios.[395] Several interpretations have however been suggested. Since Apollo was known as lizard killer, and Aristotle mentioned the habit of lizards of hiding in holes (*phôleuein*),[396] it is assumed that the epiclesis Pholeuterios is possibly inspired by the particular behaviour of these reptiles.[397] *Phôleutêrios* is also compared with the title of the head of the Eleatic philosophical association, *phôlarchos,* whereas Apollo Pholeuterios is interpreted as a god worshipped in Histria by a group of physicians.[398] However, a connection between the cult of Apollo in Histria and the Italian Eleatics does not seem plausible: there are no traces of a medical or philosophical association in Histria.[399] It would also be very unusual for a god's epiclesis to have derived from a designation of a recently founded organization. Finally, it is assumed that *phôleutêrios* was related to *phôleuein* in the meaning 'to hide', 'to protect', and that Apollo Pholeuterios was a local Histrian god-protector, like Apollo Epikourios, Alexikakos, or Loimios.[400] This approach undervalues the singularity of the epiclesis Pholeuterios.

Given Apollo's prominence as an oracular deity, the 'den' was likely to have served as a *manteion.* This epiclesis reflects perhaps the essential role of protracted habitation in a cave or an underground dwelling in Thracian myth and cult. The place of worship of Apollo Pholeuterios, Histria, and its proximity to the lands of the Getae, is significant. At the same time, the cult of Apollo Pholeuterios

[394] Vinogradov 2000: 139; Vinogradov cites as an analogy another boundary stone from Histria, *ISM* i. 106.

[395] Robert, *Bull.* 94 (1981), no. 337; Ehrhardt 1983: 139, 435. 266.

[396] *Hist. Anim.* 2. 11. 503b23.

[397] Pippidi 1984: 266.

[398] Ibid. On the Eleatics and their pholarchs, see below, Ch. 4.3.

[399] Notwithstanding the fact that Eleans visited the Pontic area. An Elean is perhaps mentioned in a Hellenistic inscription from Callatis (*SEG* 24. 1028, cf. *Bull.* 78 (1965), 263; Vinogradov 1999: 143). A 5th-cent. tombstone from Olbia provides evidence of a visit or a stay of another Elean (Vinogradov 1999: 142; 2000).

[400] Sacco 1981.

may be linked with Greek cave cults of Apollo and the Greek belief in the oracular inspiration achieved in the depths of the earth.

There is no direct link between Apollo Pholeuterios and the pholarchs of the Eleatics. In both cases, the use of the words deriving from *phôleos* originates in a widespread belief in the significance of catabasis to caverns for the acquisition of divine wisdom and inspiration.

Near the Thracian coast, at Aliki on Thasos, an imposing sanctuary which existed from the sixth century till the late Roman period yielded a fragmentary third-century inscription, perhaps a dedication, mentioning Apollo and a cave.[401] In the immediate vicinity of the precinct, about 50 m away from it, there is a cave where pottery and ex-votos dated to the same time-span as the sanctuary were discovered, at least one of the inscriptions mentioning Apollo.[402] Another large cavern is located inside the sanctuary.[403] Apollo appears to be one of the gods worshipped in the sanctuary, where his cult was performed in caves;[404] however, the exact nature of Apollo's cult at Aliki remains uncertain.

Paphos

Apollo Hylates first appears at Nea Paphos on Cyprus in two fourth-century syllabic inscriptions placed at the entrance and within a cave, actually a rock-cut tomb furnished for the god's use by the dedicant of the complex.[405] The cavern had a superstructure above it, a rectangular temple with pitched roof.[406] It was a part of an impressive precinct of the god, arranged into a series of open courtyards and comprising a water source, in accordance with the traditional setting of many oracular shrines of Apollo.[407] The underground construction

[401] The sanctuary: Daux 1962: 949–59; the inscription: Daux 1965: 966: *]N Apollôni/ s]pêlaion.*

[402] The cave: Daux 1962: 959; 1965: 970–1; ex-voto: *IG* xii. 8. 592: *Daos Apollô . . .*

[403] Daux 1965: 966.

[404] Ibid. Other gods, such as *Theoi Sôzontes,* are mentioned in the inscriptions from the sanctuary (Daux 1962: 959).

[405] Mitford 1960.

[406] Mlynarczyk 1980: 246.

[407] Ibid. 247–9.

consists of a long and wide antechamber, transformed from a dromos leading to the tomb, and two chambers, a rectangular one, about 3×5 m and a round domed vault, *c.*5 m in diameter. The roof of the vault features an opening, connecting it with the temple.[408] The conversion of an abandoned tomb into Apollo's shrine would be unthinkable if it had not been done in accordance with the demands of the god's cult.

Oracular activities were perhaps performed at the site. The artificial cavern consists of two subterranean rooms, reminiscent of the two underground chambers in Apollo's temple at Claros.[409] The cult statue of Apollo, as represented on contemporary Paphian coins, depicts the god seated on an omphalos, the symbol of Delphi and prophecy.[410] The person who left the dedications[411] stated that he accomplished the cutting of 'the entry to this cave' on the divine command,[412] implying that he was chosen to experience a live contact with the deity. Thus, the association of the Paphian cave with inspired vision, at least in the instigation to the foundation of the underground shrine, is beyond doubt.

Hylates, whose name is confined to Cyprus, is presumably a native Cypriot god.[413] He seems to have been joined to the Greek national god in the late fifth century.[414] The sanctuary of Apollo Hylates at Kourion, founded in the late seventh–early sixth century, was much more ancient and famous than the fourth-century foundation at Paphos.[415] Prominent features of the precinct at Kourion were a circular construction planted with sacred trees and a grove with a source sacred to Hylates, whose epithet sounded like 'the god of the

[408] Ibid. 240, fig. 1. [409] Ibid. 245. [410] Ibid. 250–1.

[411] This person was a dignitary (*ho archos*) at the court of Nikocles, the last king of Paphos who made every effort to emphasize his Hellenic connections, including his devotion to the Greek gods, Mitford 1960: 6; Mlynarczyk 1980: 244–5, 248–9; Masson 1988*a*.

[412] *O(m)phiocheusas:* Mitford 1960: 7; Mlynarczyk 1980: 239. It is unclear whether the 'divine voice' belonged to Apollo, whose shrine was erected, or to Aphrodite, the Lady of Paphos.

[413] Soren 1987: 43.

[414] Mitford 1960: 6; Mlynarczyk 1980: 243–5; Dietrich 1986: 156–7. Hylates is mentioned on his own in 5th-cent. and later inscriptions, Mlynarczyk 1980: 243; Dietrich 1986: 157.

[415] Buitron-Oliver 1996.

grove or woodland' to the Greeks.[416] In this respect, the cult at Kourion is likely to reflect the local tradition associating Hylates with vegetation.[417] In contrast, the precinct at Paphos with its artificial tomb-like cavern appears to expose the traditional Greek aspect of Apollo's cult, the god's predilection for dark nooks.

Hieracome (Hylai?)[418]

Pausanias describes a cave sacred to Apollo near Magnesia on the Meander, at Hieracome, that contained an ancient image of the god, which 'bestowed strength for every endeavour'.[419] Men sacred to the god (*autôi andres hieroi*) leapt there from high rocks, uprooted huge trees, and climbed mountain paths with them. Livy mentions an oracle of Apollo at Hieracome, where responses were given in elegant verse.[420] The two authors appear to be referring to the same locality near Magnesia, and most probably give different names to the same oracle.[421]

A stay in the Hieracome cavern seems to have produced a mildly euphoric effect, perhaps due to some gas of a kind similar to those discharged at Hierapolis and at Acharaca: all these caves were situated in the valley of Meander, discussed earlier. Comparison with Hierapolis is especially instructive: whereas in Hierapolis the mephitic cavern was sacred to Pluto, and the underground connection to the temple of Apollo remained concealed, perhaps secret, at Hieracome Apollo owned the cave openly and proudly.

[416] Farnell 1907: iv. 112; Soren 1987: 39, 42. On groves sacred to Apollo, see Birge 1994; Bonnechere 2007.

[417] Dietrich 1986: 130, 148, 151–4.

[418] The name of the place is uncertain; *Aulai* is Wilamowitz's conjecture instead of *Hylai* in the manuscripts of Pausanias. For the problems in establishing the location of the site, see Picard 1922: 462.

[419] Paus. 10. 32. 6.

[420] 38. 13.

[421] Picard 1922: 463. It seems that the account of the consultation of Apollo's oracle by Carians in Athen. 15. 672E refers to Hyllouala in Caria (Kaibel's conjecture), mentioned by Stephanus of Byzantium as a village in Caria and an abode of Apollo Carios (s.v. *Hullouala*). Hybla in Sicily, which is named in the manuscripts, would be an odd place for Carians to seek an oracle. If in fact this oracle was Hyllouala, the name Hylai in the manuscript version may be retained, and Wilamowitz's conjecture (Aulai rather than Hylai) is unnecessary.

Apollo's cult is linked to a cave and god-sent dreams in Phrygia, as well. Pausanias records a joint cult of Heracles, Apollo, and Hermes 'of the cave' (*Spêlaitai*) in a cavern near Themisonium.[422] It is noteworthy that the three deities appeared to the magistrates of this city in a dream, and commanded that the inhabitants hide the inhabitants from the approaching Gauls in this cavern, which is reminiscent of dream oracles, particularly at Acharaca.

It may be meaningful that in Athens Apollo Pythios, the paternal god of the city, was worshipped as a cave-dweller, in a cavern beneath the northern rocks of the Acropolis, known as Akrai or Makrai. The cave was sacred to Pan and the Nymphs, as well.[423] The association of Apollo with this cavern is of an early date: it is mentioned by Euripides as the place where the god begot Ion by Creusa.[424] Outside the city, at the cave of the Nymphs at Vari, Apollo received a dedication as *Hersos*, 'of the dew', this remarkable epithet probably indicating that the god felt at home in the humid cave.[425]

To summarize, in several ancient oracular shrines of Apollo, the procedure of inspired oracle-giving was focused on caves, either natural or artificial. At Ptoion, the mouthpiece of Apollo seems to have been endowed with inspiration by the god's presence in the grotto. At Claros, the enquirer remained outside the oracular cave, and only the inspired medium entered it. Apollo was worshipped in several places as the master of a den or a cavern. At Hieracome, the cave was probably instrumental as a closed space where gas could concentrate in sufficient amounts to affect the state of consciousness of those entering it.

5. THE DELPHIC ADYTON: THEORIES AND FACTS

The middle of the Greek world was in Delphi. It was marked with a stone known as the *omphalos*, 'navel', the umbilical midpoint of the

[422] 10. 32. 5–6.

[423] Dem. *De corona* 141–4; *IG* ii/iii^2 2891, 2893, 2894, 2897, 2898, 2902, 2907–11, 2913–15; *SEG* 18. 67; 21. 677, 678; 24. 210. For the site, its topography, and history see Wickens 1986: ii. 361–92; Nulton 2003.

[424] *Ion* 10; Paus. 1. 28. 4; Farnell 1907: iv. 113, 156–7.

[425] *IG* i^3 981; see above, Ch. 2.1.

universe. The heart of Delphi was a cavern, which accommodated the *omphalos* and the seat of the greatest of the Greek oracles. This cavern seemed so essential to the Greeks that the place which was initially called Pytho[426] changed its name to Delphi, *Delphoi*, the word deriving most probably from *delphus*, 'hollow'.[427]

Etymology alone would hardly justify deductions concerning the role of the cavern in the Delphic ritual, but it is endorsed by ancient descriptions of the oracle, which unanimously refer to a cavity in the temple, and to the Pythia, the prophetic priestess, inspired by emanations from under ground. Till the beginning of the twentieth century, this tradition had never been questioned.[428] The archaeological excavations in Delphi, which yielded no substantial remains of the adyton, brought about a completely different approach to the reconstruction of the prophetic séance, initiated by A. P. Oppé.[429] The prevailing opinion now was that neither subterranean hollows nor gases affecting the mental state of the Pythia ever existed in the adyton. As a result, the entire ancient tradition had to be explained away, and this task was ingeniously carried out by several scholars. Their hypercritical attitude is indeed paradoxical, since early in the twentieth century F. Courby had already noted that only meagre traces of the adyton had been preserved, and that these remains did not contradict the traditional image of the temple. Although there was no trace of a natural cleft below the temple floor, indications of the existence of an artificial grotto were discovered.[430] Recent geological discoveries in the area of Delphi have identified traces of gases which could have been the prophetic gas emitted by the strata underlying the temple. Thus, there are two main questions to be re-examined: first, whether a natural or artificial cavern existed inside the temple of Apollo in Delphi, and secondly, whether gaseous substances were emitted there. The reconstruction of prophetic activities inside the adyton of the Delphic temple is therefore reassessed below on the basis of the textual, archaeological, as well as the new geological data.

[426] *H. Ap.* 183, 372, 390, 517.

[427] Frisk 1973–9: s.v. *Delphoi*; Chantraine 1983–4: s.v. *Delphoi*; Parke and Wormell 1956: i. 15.

[428] Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: i. 350, iii. 75–102; Rohde 1925: 290.

[429] Oppé 1904. The first to doubt the traditional picture of the mantic session in Delphi was von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff (1903: 579), but he did not develop this idea.

[430] Courby 1927: 47–80; Roux 1976: 94; cited with approval by Vallois 1931: 319–21; Parke 1939: 20, 27–8; Parke and Wormell 1956: i. 21; Green 1989: 110; Sissa 1990: 14.

The Delphic cavern in textual evidence

No aspect of the Delphic ritual is crystal clear, but as compared to other Greek cultic centres, Delphi has yielded abundant textual testimonies, dating from different epochs and, on the whole, giving a coherent picture of the way it functioned. Although only few were allowed into 'the innermost part of the temple',[431] the ceremony of oracle-giving has never been a secret from the public:[432] it was attended not only by Delphic clergy but also by the enquirers themselves, after they had performed the customary purifications and sacrifices. Ancient authors referred to this ceremony freely, and painters depicted it on vases.[433]

The earliest reference to Apollo's responses at Pytho appears in the *Odyssey*, and Pytho as a sacred place is mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad*, and by Hesiod in the *Theogony*.[434] Thus, by the eighth century the Delphic sanctuary had already been established as an oracular centre, and remained active, with intermittent periods of prestige and decline, till the ban on divination by Theodosius in AD 391.[435] Few are the Classical texts where Delphi and its pronouncements are not mentioned. The problem is that, during the period when the Pythian temple was at its zenith, all the authors took for granted the acquaintance of the public with its procedures, and quote numerous examples of Delphic prophecy.[436] They refrained, however, from giving a complete account of the ritual, and only seldom conveyed any details.[437] In fact, when Herodotus wishes to describe an oracle unknown to the general public, he states plainly that the responses were given there 'just as at Delphi', obviously assuming that everyone was familiar with the Delphic procedure.[438]

Prophecy was delivered by a simple woman from Delphi, known as the Pythia. She was chosen to serve the god by giving indications to men in divinely inspired speech.[439] By the first centuries AD one

[431] *Es de tou vaou to esôtatôi*, Paus. 10. 24. 5.
[432] Parke and Wormell 1956: i. 17.
[433] Sissa 1990: 15–20.
[434] *Od.* 8. 79; *Il.* 9. 404–5; *Theog.* 498.
[435] Price 1985: 131; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 60; Green 1989: 92; Dietrich 1990: 170.
[436] Collected in Parke and Wormell 1956 and Fontenrose 1978.
[437] Parke 1939: 18. [438] Her. 7. 111. [439] Plut. *Mor.* 405C.

Pythia sufficed, but earlier, in the Classical age of prosperity of the sanctuary, three priestesses held office simultaneously. Initially a young girl served as Pythia, but later the role was filled by women over 50. In any case, Pythia had to be chaste, either a virgin or a woman who no longer engaged in marital relations.[440] Furthermore, the Pythia had to live in isolation from all contact and relation with strangers, to forestall any emotion which would interfere with her function as a mouthpiece of the god.[441]

Originally the Pythia gave oracular responses once a year, on Apollo's birthday, the seventh of the Delphic month Bysios. Changes occurred due to the increasing popularity of the oracle, and during the Classical period the Pythia prophesied nine times a year, on the seventh of each month, excluding the three winter months, when Apollo was believed to leave Delphi and dwell with his chosen people, the legendary Hyperboreans.[442] Before the ceremony of prophecy-giving, a goat chosen as a sacrifice to Apollo was sprinkled with water; the animal's trembling was considered a sign of the god's willingness to speak.[443] Having purified herself with water from the sacred Castalian spring, the Pythia entered the holy of holies in the innermost part of the temple known as the *aduton* (adyton, 'space not to be entered'), *manteion* ('prophetic chamber'), or *chrêstêrion* ('seat of an oracle'). During the oracular session, the priestess mounted a tripod, the symbol of Delphic divination, and inspired by Apollo, responded to the questions posed by enquirers.[444] Besides the tripod, the adyton contained the omphalos, a round stone

[440] Diod. 16. 26. 6; Parke 1939: 32; Parke and Wormell 1956: i. 34–40; Flacelière 1938: 79; Roux 1976: 64–9, 147; Latte 1940: 17; Sissa 1990: 33; Maurizio 1998.

[441] Plut. *Mor.* 438C. Cf. Iamblichus' account (*De myst.* 3. 11) of the prophet at Claros who had to withdraw from everyday affairs, and prepare himself to be possessed by the god.

[442] Flacelière 1938: 72; Roux 1976: 70–5; Parke 1939: 15; Amandry 1950: 81.

[443] Plut. *Mor.* 435BC, 437A; Flacelière 1938: 76; Roux 1976: 83–4.

[444] The conception of the Pythia's enthusiasm as a marital union between the priestess and the god, and her inspiration as resulting from 'her willingness to couple with the god' (Sissa 1990: 32; Maurizio 1998: 155; cf. Latte 1940) cannot be extended to the enthusiasm of male prophets, at Claros, for instance. Thus, the requirement of chastity and a secluded life is not related to the priestess's sex; alongside other restrictions, it is a precondition for the individual's ability to experience the trance necessary to attain the divine revelation.

believed to designate the navel of the world, the sacred laurel tree, the tomb of Dionysus, and a golden statue of Apollo.[445]

After the Pythia had been asked the question, she entered an altered state of consciousness, known to the Greeks as prophetic *mania*.[446] Although possessed by the god, she was neither frenzied nor hysterical.[447] In both painted and verbal depictions, she appears calm and concentrated.[448] Her utterance, heard by the consulters present in the adyton, was articulate and could be rendered in verse or in prose,[449] even if the meaning remained obscure: the oracular Apollo was *Loxias*, 'the ambiguous'. 'The lord whose *manteion* is in Delphi neither reveals nor conceals, but indicates', says Heraclitus.[450] What interests us most is the location of the holy of holies of the temple, namely, whether it incorporated a cavern or a hollow, and the way the Pythia was endowed with divine inspiration.

The cave in Delphi and the Pythia's inspiration: Strabo

The earliest extant explicit description of the prophetic séance is given by Strabo on the eve of the first century AD, when the oracle was beginning to fall into disuse, a process to be deplored by Plutarch a century later. Strabo reports:

[445] Pausanias (10. 8. 6–32. 1) provides a detailed account of the Delphic sanctuary in his time, but says of the innermost part of Apollo's temple only that few people are allowed into it, and that it contains a statue of Apollo (10. 24. 5). The main features of the adyton are frequently mentioned by many ancient authors, and often discussed by modern researchers: Flacelière 1938: 81–5; Roux 1976: 121–45; Suárez de la Torre 2005: 23–7. It remains unclear whether the consulters sat in a separate place (*oikos*), which enabled them to hear the Pythia, but not to see her (Roux 1976: 149).

[446] Rohde 1925: 312–13; Dodds 1973: 65–101; Maurizio 1995: 76–9.

[447] Depiction of the Pythia as delirious became traditional from the time of the early Christian writers, who contrasted the pagan priestess possessed by a malicious spirit which entered her via her genitalia (e.g. Orig., *Contra Celsum* 7. 3; Schol in Aristoph. *Plut.* 39) to Christian prophets, conscious of their words, and inspired by the pure Spiritus Sanctus (Amandry 1950: 21–2; cf. Price 1985: 136; Sissa 1990: 22–3). This picture may have been suggested by the descriptions of Pythiae forced to prophecy, discussed below.

[448] For a different view, see Roux 1976: 153.

[449] Strabo 9. 3. 5; Amandry 1950: 164; Delcourt 1981: 54–5; Roux 1976: 157; Maurizio 1995: 70; for a different approach see Parke and Wormell 1956: i. 39; Whittaker 1965: 26.

[450] *DK* fr. 93; cf. Parke 1939: 28–31; Whittaker 1965: 24–8; Serra 1998.

They say that the prophetic chamber (*manteion*) is a cave, hollow in depth (*antron koilon kata bathous*), with a rather narrow mouth, from which arises the breath of inspiration (*pneuma enthousiastikon*); and that over the mouth is placed a high tripod, which the Pythia mounts, receiving the breath, to utter oracles in both verse and prose, though the latter too are put into verse by poets in the service of the temple.[451]

It is evident that Strabo did not consult the oracle himself, therefore did not enter the adyton, since otherwise he would not have started with the qualified statement 'they say'. In his report on Delphi the geographer cites not only his own observations and information supplied by local guides, but also books by earlier writers.[452]

While Strabo depicts the place of the oracle as *antron*, it is clear that, in addition to the cavity of unspecified depth which he describes, another space existed above the cavity, where the Pythia's tripod stood. Certain emanations arose from the mouth of the cavity, according to Strabo, which inspired the Pythia to prophesy. The prophetess's state is defined as *enthousiasmos,* divine inspiration or possession. As opposed to the Bacchic ecstasy, which involved violent whirling and roaming in the wild, the *enthousiasmos* of prophetic nature did not manifest itself in visibly abnormal behaviour. While Greek painted pottery normally portrays the Bacchants in twisted attitudes, depictions of the Delphic ritual, notably the famous fifth-century Vulci cup,[453] show the prophetess calm and concentrated.

Pythia's inspiration is due to *pneuma*, 'breath', rising from the cavity. Subtle and intangible, *pneuma* is nevertheless perceived as something essentially material. Strabo's contemporary known as Pseudo-Longinus elaborates this subject in his treatise *On the sublime*: 'the Pythia approaches the tripod, in a place where is a cleft in the earth (*rhêgma gês*), exhaling, they say, divine vapour (*anapneos atmos entheos*), becomes at once pregnant with divine power and is immediately inspired to give prophecy'.[454]

[451] 9. 3. 5.

[452] Notably Ephorus, who is in Strabo's opinion a trustworthy authority (Strabo 9. 3. 12), although Strabo is critical of Ephorus' tendency to insert myths into his account of the early history.

[453] The cylix by Codrus Painter represents Themis as Pythia seated on the tripod, with Aegeus as enquirer in front of her. It was manufactured in Athens in 440/430 (Berlin Mus. No. F 2538, Beazley 1963: 1269. 5). It is reproduced in almost every work on Greek prophecy.

[454] 13. 2.

As a result of misreadings of Strabo's passage several authors questioned the reliability of the ancient tradition on Delphi. *Antron koilon kata bathous* is understood as 'a hollow deep cave',[455] although the Greek text does not refer to the depth of the cavity; *pneuma enthousiastikon* is rendered as 'exhalation that inspires a divine frenzy'.[456] The customary English translation of *enthousiasmos* as 'frenzy' is misleading: it implies fury and agitation, whereas the Greek word does not indicate that possession by the god caused rage or vehement movement.[457] Since the Pythia normally appears quite calm and since the archaeological excavations of the temple (discussed below) have demonstrated that there was no place for a natural 'deep cavern', Strabo's account was regarded as unreliable. The reproach is unfair: Strabo refers to the shape, rather than the depth, of the cavity of unspecified nature, as well as to inspiration, rather than frenzy, of the Pythia.

Exhalations and the Pythia's inspiration: Plutarch

While Strabo used second-hand evidence of the procedure inside the adyton, Plutarch witnessed the Pythia's behaviour and the layout of the Delphic temple directly during his long service there as a priest. These subjects are mentioned by Plutarch in two dialogues, *The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse (De Pythiae oraculis)* and *The Obsolescence of Oracles (De defectu oraculorum)*, written at the beginning of the second century AD.[458] The subject matter of both dialogues is the degradation of prophetic centres, and the regular operation of oracles is referred to only when appropriate, without much elaboration on details which often remain obscure.

Plutarch does not explain what guided the choice of a particular woman for the role of the Pythia, but indicates that 'what is called

[455] Fontenrose 1978: 200; 'une excavation profonde', Will 1942/3: 163; 'deep hollow *antron*', Holland 1933: 201; 'a cave that is hollowed out deep down in the earth', Jones in the Loeb edn. of Strabo.

[456] Holland 1933: 201; 'breath that inspires divine frenzy' by Jones.

[457] '... *mania* means transport, rapture, inspiration, ecstasy, not insanity, frenzy, delirium, hysteria' (Fontenrose 1978: 204).

[458] For Plutarch's office in Delphi, the date and the composition of the dialogues and other pertinent subjects see Flacelière 1943, 1947, 1962; Schröder 1990; Jaillard 2007.

inspiration (*enthousiasmos*), seems to be a combination of two impulses, the soul being simultaneously impelled through one of these by some external influence, and through the other by its own nature'[459] (translation by F. C. Babbitt). The soul of the Pythia used by the god is further compared to a musical instrument, which produces music as the result of interaction of its own nature and exterior force.[460] This comparison may imply that women of a certain mental or psychological disposition were to be elected to serve as conductors of the god's indications.

Concerning *enthousiasmos*, the reader is given the following definition:[461] 'The voice is not that of the god, not the utterance of it, nor the diction, nor the metre, but all these are the woman's; he puts into her mind only the visions (*phantasiai*), and creates the light in her soul in regard to the future; for inspiration (*enthousiasmos*) is precisely this' (translation by F. C. Babbitt).

Plutarch says much more than Strabo about the prophetic *pneuma*. He bases his assertion of its existence on three grounds: factual, mytho-historical, and philosophical. *Pneuma*, according to *The Obsolescence of Oracles*,[462] was physically present in the adyton, perceived by people attending the prophetic séances, and its qualities changed from time to time:

> The exhalation (*anathumiasis*) is not in the same state all the time, but it has recurrent periods of weakness and strength. Of the proof which I use I have as witnesses many foreigners and all those serving at the shrine. The room in which they sit, those who would consult the god, is filled, not frequently or regularly, but as it may chance from time to time, with a sweet smell and breath of air (*pneuma*), as if the most exquisite and expensive perfume is brought from a source in the adyton.

It is clearly stated that not only the inspired prophetess, but also enquirers and temple officials could smell the odour. *Pneuma* is described as a physical substance: its intensity changes and depends on heat or on dilation; the current may shift its location or it may disappear altogether.[463] The holy and divine breath may be issued by itself, through the air, or together with the flow of the water.[464]

[459] *Mor.* 404F. [460] Similar ideas are expressed in *Mor.* 414E, 431B.
[461] *Mor.* 397C. [462] *Mor.* 437C–D.
[463] *Mor.* 433F; 437D; 434AB. [464] *Mor.* 432D

Plutarch wrote this account for his contemporaries, many of them familiar with the proceedings in Delphi, and it is highly unlikely that he invented the smell in the adyton. If the perfume had been merely the fantasy of those who believed that the divine presence was manifested by a sweet fragrance, it would have been scented (or at least claimed to be scented) constantly, and the meticulous account of the unpredictability of the sacred vapour and its physical qualities would be out of place.[465]

The second argument concerns the foundation myth of the oracle.[466] According to a myth told in Delphi, the 'power' (*dunamis*) which caused ecstasy was first manifested 'when a shepherd by chance fell in (*empesontos kata tuchên*) and later gave inspired utterances'. The shepherd's name was Coretas, and his predictions proved to be true. The story is presumably a foundation myth, linking together the three main elements of the Pythian prophecy: the emanations, the cleft where they originate, and the inspiration they cause.[467]

Plutarch records an abridged version of the story narrated in detail by Diodorus of Sicily, who cites the ancient tale told in Delphi.[468] According to the myth, before Delphi was founded, in the place where the adyton was situated there was a chasm (*chasma*), and goats approaching it started leaping and uttering unusual sounds. When the surprised goatherd peered down this chasm, he experienced the same inspiration (*enthousiasmos*) as his goats, and began to foretell the future. All the people who approached the chasm after him became inspired, as well. 'For these reasons,' says Diodorus, 'the oracle was marvelled and regarded as a prophetic shrine of the Earth.' Later, to prevent people from leaping in *enthousiasmos* and falling into the

[465] Sweet scent as a characteristic sign of divine presence in antiquity: Classen *et al.* 1994: 45–8.

[466] Plut. *Mor.* 433CD.

[467] Oppé 1904: 220. The argument against the existence of a cavern in the Delphic temple includes a suggestion that *empesontos* means 'to chance upon', rather than 'fall in'. That would make the phrase very awkward, because in Plutarch's text there is no indication of a place, an object, or a person the shepherd is supposed to 'chance upon'—he simply 'fell in'. Moreover, if *empesontos* means here 'chanced upon', the words *kata tuchên*, 'by chance', make this phrase a pleonasm. Thus, the word *empesontos* was most probably used in the literal sense: Coretas fell into some place below the ground level, and this episode was supposed to explain the role of the cleft in the Delphic ritual.

[468] 16. 26.

chasm, a woman was appointed to sit on a tripod and prophesy. Pausanias, among other Delphian foundation myths, tells a similar story of shepherds who came upon the oracle, became inspired by the vapour, and prophesied as the mouthpiece of Apollo.[469]

Finally, there is the philosophical argument. It is put forward in the most forceful form in *The Obsolescence of Oracles*:[470]

Moreover the earth sends forth for men streams of many other potencies, some of them producing ecstasy (*ekstatikas*), diseases or death, others helpful, benignant, and beneficial, as is plain from the experience of persons who have come upon them. But the prophetic current and breath (*to de mantikon rheuma kai pneuma*) is most divine and holy, whether it issue by itself through the air or come in the company of running waters. (Translation by F. C. Babbitt.)

The idea that various phenomena are produced by the Earth belongs to the core of the Stoic natural philosophy, and has been developed in other schools as well, starting from Aristotle.[471] In its application to the prophetic powers, including those manifest at Delphi and at Lebadeia, this conception is repeated by several other authors.[472] In *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, the interlocutor who puts forward these ideas cites other Stoic conceptions as well.[473] On the one hand, the facts of nature are explained as resulting from the gods' will: Apollo and Gaia join forces to produce the 'inspiring vapours'.[474] On the other hand, the idea that human souls possess the inborn ability to prophesy reflects the Platonic conception of souls acquiring this ability in certain states, such as sleep or illness or imminent death, which was also adopted by the Stoics.[475] The Neoplatonist Iamblichus applied it to Delphi: in his opinion, the importance of the breath exhaled through the fissure and of perching on the prophetic

[469] Paus. 10. 5. 6: *entheoi te egenonto hupo tou atmou.* Parke regards the myth of Coretas as a rationalistic explanation of the Delphic procedure (Parke 1939: 20; Parke and Wormell 1956: i. 20).

[470] 432D.

[471] *Meteor.* 340 b 27; Will 1942/3: 173; Flacelière 1943: 101–4; Amandry 1950: 222.

[472] e.g. Ps.-Arist., *De mundo* 395B; Cic. *De div.* 1. 19.

[473] 425C–426E; Flacelière 1947: 12.

[474] *Hai mantikai anathumiaseis*, *Mor.* 433E.

[475] Plut. *Mor.* 432C–D; Plato *Tim.* 71E, cf. Cic. *De div.* 1. 30; Flacelière 1947: 43–7; Amandry 1950: 222–4; Schröder 1990: 24–59; Schröder 1994/5.

tripod are negligible, and it is through the possession by the god that the Pythia is installed with divine illumination.[476]

However, the myth of Coretas is a popular creation hardly tarred by philosophic reasoning. The myths of previous owners of the Delphic oracle,[477] which attribute the foundation of the oracle to chthonic powers, suggest another connection between revelation in Delphi and the subterranean realm. These myths, as well as general familiarity with the existence of the *pneuma*, attested by Strabo, indicate that in this case the philosophic explanation grew out of popular conviction, rather than vice versa.[478] In fact, the common belief in breath and wind as 'mediums of contact between god and men' had existed in Greece since Homer's time.[479]

Finally, another substance flowing from the depth of the earth was widely used in divination, namely water. Before entering the adyton, the Pythia drank from a sacred spring, and she is depicted on the Vulci cup holding a phial.[480] Water of the Cassotis spring near the temple of Apollo was said to sink under the ground to make the Pythia prophesy in the adyton.[481]

In several sanctuaries of Apollo water was an important instrument in the mechanism of prophecy-giving.[482] Pausanias records

[476] *De myst.* 3. 11.

[477] Discussed below in this chapter.

[478] Even Amandry, who is reluctant to see any material reality behind the notion of Delphic *pneuma*, presumes that the myth of the chthonic origins of the oracle lies at the foundation of the philosophical doctrine of telluric emanations (Amandry 1950: 235).

[479] Smith 1965: 418. Aristotle thought that honey, a divine substance possessing prophetic powers, fell from the air: Arist. *Hist. anim.* 1. 1. 488a16–18, Bonnechere 2003: 230.

[480] For the interpretation of the function of the phial, see Dunbabin 1951: 65–6.

[481] Paus. 10. 24. 7. Alterations in the water flow in the springs of Delphi are probably responsible for the substitution of the Castalia for the Cassotis (Lucian. *Herm.* 60, *Bis acc.* 1; Parke 1939: 26;1978; Amandry 1950: 66, 135–9; Roux 1976: 137; Delcourt 1981: 20; Cole 1988: 162). In earlier accounts the Castalia is a source of water for purification rather than inspiration (Parke 1967*a*: 75; 1978). Plutarch notes that the water from the stream running near the shrines of the Earth and the Muses had been used for libations and lustrations in the past (*Mor.* 402CD). In this connection he cites Simonides, who praised the Muses and Clio as 'holy guardian of lustrations', which means that early in the 5th cent. water still flowed in the spring, dry by Plutarch's time.

[482] Halliday 1913: 116–62; Elderkin 1941: 125–6; Cole 1988: 162–3; Rosenberger 2001: 130–1; cf. Georgoudi 1998: 321–6. In fact, at Ptoion in Boeotia, prophecy was apparently delivered in an artificial grotto, by a prophet who drank from the sacred spring (Schachter 1967: 1–2). Water plays a prominent role in other Boeotian oracles

that in Boeotia of old, oracles were obtained by drinking water. Water also served as a means of communication between this world and the netherworld.[483] More easily perceptible than odour, water is an even a more suitable portent of divine power than air. One can hardly argue that all these practices were invented by intellectuals influenced by Stoicism.

Thus, the testimony of Plutarch, who had profound first-hand knowledge of the Delphic ritual, and wrote for people he could hardly deceive on these matters, attests to the same three basic elements of the action in the holy of holies as described by Strabo: a hollow, emanations, and the subsequent mantic inspiration of the Pythia.

The *pneuma* seems to be the most enigmatic element in the mysterious process of prophecy-giving at Delphi. Many scholars consider the ancient evidence of its existence to be false.[484] Those tending to rely on the ancient tradition interpret it, like the Christian Spiritus Sanctus, as evidence of religious and psychological, rather than natural, phenomena.[485] Odours perceived by the consulters are explained as resulting either from auto-suggestion,[486] or from a trick performed by the priests.[487] Drug-assisted inspiration is still considered plausible.[488] Delphic *pneuma* is even envisaged as an analogy to gynecological treatment by fumigation.[489] The lack of reference to *pneuma* in accounts of other oracles is explained as due to the exceptional popularity of Delphi.[490] It has recently been suggested that the exhalations and the cavern resulted from a projection onto

of Apollo, at Telphousa and Tegyra (Schachter 1967: 8). At Claros the prophetic source was located in an underground chamber, where the priest descended before uttering oracles (Robert 1967; Parke 1985: 219–24). The sanctuary of Didyma started as an enclosure around the sacred spring, which continued to be used for divination during later periods (Parke 1985: 210–19; 1986: 124; cf. Fontenrose 1988: 81–4).

[483] Paus. 9. 2. 1. At the dream oracle of Amphiaraus in Oropos, the god was believed to rise up via a spring (Paus. 1. 34. 4). Cf. Rosenberger 2001: 130.

[484] Will 1942/3; Amandry 1950: 215–30; Fontenrose 1978: 197; Parke 1939: 21; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 172; Dietrich 1978: 6; Rosenberger 2001: 53.

[485] Poulsen 1920: 22–3; Will 1942/3: 174; Flacelière 1965: 51; Roux 1976: 156–7; Schefer 1996: 28.

[486] Dodds 1973: 73; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 67; Parke 1967*a*: 80.

[487] Holland 1933: 214. Cf. Flacelière 1938: 94; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 172.

[488] Green 1989: 102; Elderkin 1941: 128–9 suggests that the Pythia drank water mixed with wine.

[489] Sissa 1990: 44–52.

[490] Roux 1976: 156–7.

Delphi of practices prevailing in other oracular centres.[491] Finally, some scholars are reluctant to propose any explanation of ancient accounts of vapours in Delphi.[492]

The prophetic grotto: The early poets

In the literature of the Classical period the temple of Apollo Pythios and the activities of the Pythia were mentioned so often that some references to the layout of the adyton have been preserved. It is difficult to interpret them otherwise than as confirming Strabo's account.

In his trilogy the *Oresteia* Aeschylus refers to the adyton of the Delphic temple several times. In the *Choephori*, the Delphic Apollo is praised as '[the god] who dwells in the great well-built cavern (*stomion*)'.[493] This cavern is pictured as a man-made vault.[494] If indeed it is so, the fact that the cavity in the Delphic adyton was artificial does not contradict other testimonies and does not indicate that it was not used in the mantic procedure. Actually, in Trophonius' oracle at Lebadeia and in Apollo's sanctuary at Claros, the grottoes into which consulters descended were also man-made.[495]

Aeschylus begins to create the image of a subterranean vault a few lines before he mentions the *stomion*, starting the invocation to the gods 'who according to the custom hold the wealthy recess (*muchos*)[496]

[491] Rosenberger 2001: 53, 132. [492] Price 1985: 141.

[493] Vv. 803–5: *to de kalôs ktimenon ô mega naiôn stomion. Stomion* cannot be understood otherwise than 'cavern' or 'underground chamber', as all the translators of the play agree: 'And, o thou, that dwellest in the well-builded cavernous holy place' (Campbell 1893); 'God of the vast cavern and beautiful temple' (Trevelyan 1922); 'God of the great cavern in glory established' (Thomson 1938); 'And you, Apollo, lord of the glorious masoned cavern' (Fagles 1966); 'O you that dwell in the mighty cavern at Delphi' (Young 1974); 'And you, Apollo, in your Delphic cave' (Slavitt 1997); 'And you who dwell in that great and well-built vault' (Collard 2002).

[494] As the word *ktimenon*, 'created' or 'built', indicates. *Ktimenon* is an emendation of the nonsensical manuscript versions, *ktamenon* or *menôn*; this conjecture is considered quite certain (Rose 1957: comm ad. V. 808)

[495] Such words as *spêlaion* (cave), *stomion* (cavity), *chasma* (chasm) were applied to the prophetic cave of Troponius, which is described by Pausanias (9. 38. 9) as man-made. See above on the Trophonium.

[496] *Ploutogathê muchon nomizete,* v. 797. The manuscript *nomizete*, preserved by Murray (1955), is considered by some out of place in this context and changed into *brabeute* (Thomson 1938: v. 797 and comm. ad loc.)

within the abode'. In the same play Apollo is denoted 'Loxias Parnasias, owner of the great recess of the earth'.[497] The word *muchos* occurs in another play of the same trilogy, the *Eumenides*, where Apollo demands: 'Get out of the inner place of prophecy'.[498] *Muchos* means 'the innermost place', 'nook',[499] and the 'inner recess of the earth' belonging to Apollo in his prophetic aspect as Loxias must be the 'cavern' mentioned earlier in the *Choephori*.[500] The existence of the mantic *muchos*, belonging to Apollo in the *Eumenides*, further supports this identification.

Commentators on the *Oresteia* were straightforward in their approach[501] until the archaeological excavations of the temple led scholars to cast doubt on the reliability of the ancient tradition. From then on, Aeschylus' references to *stomion* and *muchos* in Delphi were interpreted as 'seeming to have been suggestive of a cave', mentioned by Strabo 'in the usual late story of a mysterious vapor', and other 'fanciful accounts of the oracle'.[502] Although the Attic playwright referred to the chasm below the oracular shrine, he was assumed to be wrong, since 'modern archaeology has disproved its existence'.[503] C. Sourvinou-Inwood interprets the passage in the *Choephori* as testifying to the existence of a small artificial opening, but grants it symbolic significance only, claiming that 'in the classical period at least, the opening was not a vehicle of prophecy', although in her opinion it served to put the prophesying Pythia in contact with the 'other' world.[504]

[497] *Megan echôn muchon chthonos*, v. 954. The reading of this phrase is clear, although the text immediately after it is corrupt.

[498] *Apallassesthe mantikôn muchôn*, v. 180. *Muchos* in this phrase is usually translated by inexact general words, e.g. 'Make off from mine oracular sanctuary' (Campbell 1893); 'Begone from my prophetic shrine' (Trevelyan 1922); 'I bid you leave this mantic cell' (Thomson 1938); 'Set the prophet's chamber free' (Fagles 1966); 'Out from my prophetic sanctuary' (Young 1974); 'This is my house, my sanctuary. Go at once' (Slavitt 1997). Only Collard renders *muchos* accurately: 'Take yourselves off from this inner place of prophecy' (2002).

[499] In particular, it occurs in a 5th-cent. Delphic response, in a description of the cave of Demeter in Phigalia: 'the nook of the cave' (*sêraggos muchos*, Paus. 8. 42. 6).

[500] Dodds 1973.

[501] Klausen 1833: comm. ad *Cho.* 759 (807); Thomson 1938: comm. ad *Cho.* 802–3.

[502] Rose 1957: comm. ad *Cho.* 808. For a more radical nihilistic position, see Oppé 1904: 216.

[503] Collard 2002: comm. ad *Cho.* 803.

[504] Sourvinou-Inwood 1987: 224.

This scepticism is astonishing. In 458, when the *Oresteia* was staged, some of the people in the audience had attended mantic séances in Delphi: we know about official Athenian delegations to Delphi during the first decades of the fifth century,[505] to say nothing about private persons who also consulted the oracle. All these enquirers visited the adyton and were present at the Pythia's prophesying. Even if Aeschylus had wished to invent or lie about the Delphic adyton, he would not have been able to mislead his audience on this subject. The details of the Delphic procedure have special significance in the *Oresteia*, with Apollo's actions and oracles as the focus of the plot.[506] In the *Eumenides* the god himself appears twice in his oracular shrine, 'the bright god who dwells in the *stomion*'.[507] How could Loxias be placed in the wrong surroundings? The idea to attribute a nook in the earth to Apollo would be bizarre, unless the audience knew about the subterranean vault. And why would a pious Athenian poet wish to fabricate details concerning the sacred Delphic temple? Or should one claim that, like Plutarch who allegedly invented vapours in order to support his Stoic preconceptions, Aeschylus created the cavern to sustain commonly known myths? It seems much more probable to hold that, in Aeschylus' day, there was an artificial vault in the Delphic adyton.

In his reference to the holy of holies in *Ion*, Euripides uses the same word as Aeschylus, *muchos*: 'into the innermost recess of the house'.[508] On several occasions Euripides designates the Delphic temple as 'the god's hollow', *guala theou*.[509] *Gualon* normally means 'hollow' or 'concavity': for instance, of a vessel or of a rock. The word is not applied to other temples,[510] and its use by Euripides demonstrates that the poet intended to emphasize that in Delphi the god possessed a cavern. Moreover, Euripides specifies that the 'hollow of

505 Her. 7. 140–2; Plut. *Arist.* 11. 3; *Thes.* 36. 1; *Cim.* 8. 6; Paus. 1. 32. 5; 3. 3. 7; cf. the responses given during the third and the fourth period in Parke and Wormell 1956: ii. 29–69.

506 Winnington-Ingram 1983: 132–53.

507 Ibid. 221.

508 *Es muchon domôn*, vv. 226–9. It is natural for a Greek to call a temple the god's house: in fact, Herodotus calls the interior of the Delphic temple *megaron*, whereas in Homer *megaron* is a palace or a hall (Roux 1976: 96).

509 *Ion* 220, 233, 245; *Androm.* 1093; *Phoen.* 237.

510 Roux 1976: 117.

Phoebus' contains the omphalos, and describes the Delphic *manteion* as 'subterranean' (*chthonion*).[511] Thus, Euripides, like Aeschylus, visualized the adyton as a vault.[512]

Not only the Athenians considered the Delphic adyton to be a vault. The Boeotian Pindar uses the word *muchos* in a description of Apollo's temple, as well: 'and you guard your oracular recess'.[513] The scholiast explains that the poet was referring to the adyton. In another Pythian ode, Pindar returns to the same image, 'the famous temple . . . in the cavities of Python',[514] apparently alluding to the myth of Python's defeat by Apollo, which is cited in another work by Pindar.[515]

In Aristonoos' hymn to Hestia, composed in the fourth century,[516] the Corinthian poet describes the goddess as holding Olympus, as well as 'the inner recess in the umbilical center of the earth[517] and the Delphic laurel tree'. The immediate proximity of the words 'Olympus' and *muchos* emphasizes the prominence of the goddess, present both at the highest summit of the world, and in its deep cavity, the adyton where the navel of the world was located.

Thus, as early as in the fifth century, the adyton of the temple of Apollo was considered to be an artificial vault.[518] The word 'adyton' in

[511] *Phoen.* 237; *Iphig. Taur.* 1245.

[512] Oppé gives a excellent example of a circular argument, claiming 'though both he [Euripides] and Sophocles use it [the word *gualon*], as *muchos* is used, in the sense of a cave, that meaning is never possible in the places where it is employed in speaking of Delphi. In these passages it means either the temple itself or the temple enclosure and is merely a misapplication of the epic phrase used as a poetical synonym for *aduton, muchos,* or *manteion*' (Oppé 1904: 217). Why is the meaning of the cave 'never possible' in these contexts? How is it that Oppé knows better than Euripides and Aeschylus the difference between legitimate application and misapplication of phrases? The only explanation given in the appendix to the article is that 'they serve as examples of the domination over the Greek mind of conventional phrases' (Oppé 1904: 239). One wonders whether the notion of 'the domination over the Greek mind' brings us any closer to the 'satisfaction of our reason' (Oppé 1904: 214) than the mysteries of the chasm.

[513] *Muchon t' amphepei mantêion, Pyth.* 5. 68.

[514] *Naon euklea . . . Puthônos en gualois, Pyth.* 8. 63.

[515] Fr. 55.

[516] *I Delph.* III. 2. 192; Furley and Bremer 2001: i. 116–18, ii. 38–45.

[517] *Ha kai Olumpon kai muchon gaias mesomphalon . . . katechousa.*

[518] For Fontenrose, the issue does not affect the subject of his book: Fontenrose 1978: 226. Since he rejects both archaeological and literary evidence, pointing to the existence of an artificial cave at Delphi, he puts forward a fantastic hypothesis that the authentic Pythian cavern was the Corycian cave (Fontenrose 1974: 403–66).

the Delphic context could be used in a narrow, as well as in a wider sense. Most ancient writers referred to the entire construction below the level of the main space of the temple as adyton or *manteion*. A few, for instance Strabo, applied the word *manteion* in a narrow sense, specifically to the orifice through which *pneuma* rose: he does not describe other features of the space where the tripod was located.[519] On the other hand, since the hole was the focal point of the Delphic ritual, words designating it could be used in a wider sense: thus, for Euripides the whole temple of Apollo was 'the god's hollow'.[520]

The descent to the adyton

Since people inside the adyton were able to see what happened in the megaron,[521] it is suggested that the adyton was not an isolated chamber, but rather the inner part of the megaron.[522] The debate on the direction taken by those who entered the adyton still continues. It is focused on the meaning of verbs of motion with the prefix *kata*-, normally indicating downward motion.[523] These verbs are used by several authors in referring to the Delphic temple.

In the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* the god 'went down into the adyton'.[524] In the fifth century, Pindar chose the verb *katabainein*, 'to descend', to describe entering Phoebus' shrine: 'coming down into the Pythian temple'.[525] In the oracle given to the seventh-century Corinthian tyrant Cypselus, the consulter's action is described by the verb *eskatabainein*, 'to descend into': 'Happy is the man who comes down into my temple.'[526] In the third century AD, Diogenes Laertius, writing a biography of Heraclides of Pontus, a fourth-century BC philosopher, records that the Pythia 'has gone down into the adyton and taken her seat'.[527]

[519] Roux 1976: 112.

[520] However, this broad usage does not imply that, as a rule, the Greeks did not distinguish between the temple (*naos*) and its inner sanctum (adyton). *Contra*: see Oppé 1904: 223–5.

[521] Aesch. *Eumen.* 39–40; Her. 1. 90–1.

[522] Roux 1976: 103; cf. Morrison 1981: 99.

[523] Flacelière 1938: 97; Elderkin 1941: 127; Delcourt 1981: 43.

[524] V. 443: *es d'aduton kateduse.*

[525] Pind. *Pyth.* 4. 55: *Puthion naon katabanta*; Vallois 1931: 322.

[526] Her. 5. 92: *emon domon eskatabainei.*

[527] Diog. Laert. 5. 91: *katiousa es to aduton.*

Referring to the Pythia's performance of her prophetic role, Plutarch consistently uses compound verbs with *kata*-.[528] The same verbs recur in his references to the actions of consulters.[529] However, since this vocabulary indicates that the oracular session took place in a vault, it is argued that 'it [the word] is seen to be a mere stock phrase',[530] and the existence of a cavern was a 'literary convention'.[531]

Plutarch brings up a whole episode showing that the Pythia's place was beneath the floor level in the temple. When Timoleon was 'descending into the prophetic chamber' (*katabainontos eis to manteion*), a headband decorated with symbols of victory or even crowns, and embroidered with figures of Nike, became detached from its place and fell on his head.[532] Now, although Plutarch does not indicate where the band was affixed, in order to land on the general's head it must have been initially located above him. Thus, Plutarch pictures Timoleon literally going down into the adyton, as not only the verb *katabainein* but also the contents of this episode show.

The discussion of these passages is dependent on the philological observation that in Homer the preposition *kata*, when used with verbs of motion in regard to a space within a building, means movement inwards.[533] This analysis of the Homeric usage, coupled with the lack of archaeological traces of an underground adyton, led several scholars to the conclusion that the oracular shrine in Delphi was on the same level as the rest of the temple.[534] Yet it has been convincingly demonstrated that the preposition *kata* with verbs of motion was not the normal Homeric idiom for entering, and compounds with the prefix *kata*- usually imply downward motion, although the exact meaning of a phrase depends on its context.[535] Moreover, Homeric usage cannot be applied automatically to the

[528] 'Goes down into the prophetic shrine' (*kateisin* or *katabainei eis to manteion* or *chrêstêrion*, *Mor.* 397A; 405C; 438B), 'descends into that place' (*hotan d'ekei katelthêi*, 408D).

[529] e.g. 'went down' (*katebaine*, 407D); Oppé 1904: 228.

[530] Oppé 1904: 230.

[531] Dietrich 1990: 168.

[532] *Tim.* 8. In fact, several hundred years earlier Aeschylus described the adyton as a 'nook decked with many crowns' (*polystephês muchos, Eumen.* 39).

[533] Myres 1900: 140–3.

[534] Braswell 1988: 134.

[535] Gray 1955.

Greek language 300–800 years after Homer. Finally, the passage from *Timoleon* reveals Plutarch's mental picture of the adyton, namely, a construction lower than the ground level of the temple. Thus, in the passages referring to the Delphic adyton, compounds with *kata-* were most probably used in their common meaning, as indicating motion downwards.

The Delphic adyton in Latin literature

The reliability of Roman authors on Delphic matters has been even more sweepingly refuted by scholars than that of the Greek writers. It has been argued not only that 'chasm theory was a rationalistic explanation and had no historical foundation',[536] but also that the need for such explanations supposedly emerged after the Romans, with their system of divination based on haruspication and augury, had won domination in the Mediterranean. Incapable, so it is alleged, of appreciating ecstatic prophecy, they concocted a materialistic account of the Pythia's inspiration—the mephitic fumes.[537] Rereading of the pertinent passages in Latin literature demonstrates however that this approach is based on a preconception. If the scholar's starting point is the presumption that neither cavern nor *pneuma* ever existed in Delphi, and an ancient author nevertheless refers either to both or to one of these, the scholarly conclusion must be that he invented them for artistic purposes or ignored the real setting. But if we begin the discussion with the text and its analysis, we will find no reasons why learned Romans should disregard or fabricate details concerning Delphi.

Lucan (the first century AD) in his historical epic *The Civil War* (otherwise known as *Pharsalia*) gives a detailed account of a fateful appeal to the Delphic oracle of Appius Claudius Pulcher, the Roman governor of Greece at the time of the war between Caesar and Pompey (49–48 BC).[538] This event is also related by Valerius Maximus.[539] In *The Civil War* this long episode[540] starts with a depiction of the origins of

[536] Dick 1965: 462.
[537] Parke 1939: 22; Parke and Wormell 1956: i. 22–3; Dick 1965: 462.
[538] Bayet 1946: 53.
[539] 1. 8. 10. Lucan may have used either Valerius or his source, Livy (Morford 1967: 65). Paulus Orosius (*Adversum paganos* 6. 15) retells this story.
[540] Lucan 5. 67–236.

the oracle, namely, with the mythical arrival of Apollo at Delphi, where the god 'saw that the huge chasm in the earth breathed forth divine truth (*vastos telluris hiatus divinam spirare fidem*), and that the ground gave out a wind that spoke, then he enshrined himself in the sacred grottoes (*sacris se condidit antris*), brooded over the holy place, and there became a prophet'[541] (translation by J. D. Duff, slightly modified). Normally, the prophetic séance took place in the 'oracular recess of the inner shrine',[542] when divine inspiration issued from the cave, entered the Pythia and caused her to prophesy. However, by the first century BC the oracle had became dumb, since the prophetic emissions had ceased for unknown reasons.[543] Appius, who wished to learn 'the secrets of Roman destiny', was therefore obliged to coerce the Pythia into speech. Lucan gives her the name of the mythical first Pythia, Phemonoe.[544]

Lucan's account of the breath of the Delphic cave as part of the divine element embedded in the world, which is indeed a Stoic doctrine,[545] is regarded by many as reflecting the materialistic conception of the Pythia's inspiration, then current in Rome.[546] The authenticity of Lucan's description of the Pythia's frenzy, feigned at first, and later real, which ends in her death,[547] is challenged, as well. It is dismissed by modern scholars as based either on Virgil's portrait of the Sibyl in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*,[548] or on Lucan's own literary fancy.[549] The tone and contents of Lucan's scene are however in sharp contrast to those of Virgil.[550] Yet they are very similar to Plutarch's account of the enforced prophetic utterance,[551] and even if this episode is fictional, the description of the behaviour of the

[541] Lucan 5. 82–5.

[542] *Adyti penetrale remoti fatidicum*, 5. 146–7, cf. 70.

[543] Lucan 5. 92–135, esp. 130–5. Parke and Wormell (1956: i. 283–4) argue that Lucan is wrong, and the oracle was not closed. The scholiast suggests that Lucan refers to its closure by Nero, but in Plutarch's age the oracle still functioned. Ahl (1976: 123) assumes that the closure was unofficial. Cf. Masters 1992: 137.

[544] Paus. 10. 5. 7.

[545] Lucan 5. 89; Morford 1967: 65; Barrat 1979: 33–4. On Lucan's Stoic philosophy see Scholtes 1969.

[546] Dick 1965: 462.

[547] Lucan 5. 147–96.

[548] Oppé 1904: 219; Bayet 1946: 57; Will 1942/3: 164; Amandry 1950: 21; Fontenrose 1978: 210.

[549] Dick 1965.

[550] Ibid. 464; Barrat 1979: 24; Ahl 1976: 127; Masters 1992: 119–20.

[551] *Mor.* 438AB.

prophetess under strain, when compelled to predict on an inauspicious day, may be authentic.[552] The argument that Lucan's Pythia rages, thus acting differently to serene Pythias portrayed elsewhere, is also unconvincing: forced to prophesy, the priestess could not have acted in her normal fashion.[553] Modern authors have attributed the frenzy, ascribed specifically to the unwilling Pythia, to all Pythias under normal circumstances.[554] They argue, consequently, that the ancients, and Lucan among them, were ignorant of the Delphic procedure. Yet Lucan and Plutarch do not maintain that the Pythia was frenzied in a standard situation, all they say is that she raged when compelled to predict. Thus, the problem stems not from a mistake on the part of the ancients, but rather the erroneous assumption of modern researchers.

Moreover, Lucan's fascination with the occult has earned him virulent criticism on the part of modern scholars, who blame him for devoting one tenth of his historical epic to the subject.[555] Lucan's genuine interest in divination and magic and his profound knowledge of their technical details[556] enabled him to choose practices that fitted into the preconceived framework of the poem, rather than radically modify them in compliance with his literary aims. The protagonist of the Delphic episode was himself well-versed in matters supernatural. Appius, a former augur, an expert on Roman religious theory and practice, well-informed on Greek cult as well,[557] was quite capable of an attempt to revive the dying oracle in Delphi.

The Delphic oracle is described as a cavern or grotto by many other Roman writers, whose testimonies are not always reliable. Cicero is the first to discuss the emanations of the Earth as the source of the Pythia's inspiration.[558] Pliny refers to the Delphic oracle as the most famous of the 'prophetic caves, where those intoxicated by exhalations predict the future'.[559] The Castalian or Cirrhaean (that is, Delphian) prophetic cave

552 Dodds 1973: 72. Bayet even suggests that Lucan was familiar with the case of Pythia's death recorded by Plutarch (Bayet 1946: 69).

553 Fontenrose 1978: 204–12.

554 e.g. Amandry 1950: 20–4; Roux 1976: 92, 151.

555 Morford 1967: 59.

556 Ibid. 60.

557 Ahl 1976: 124.

558 *De div.* 1. 19. 38; 1. 36. 79; 1. 50. 115.

559 *Hist. Nat.* 2. 95.

(*antrum*) is mentioned in first-century BC–first-century AD poetry.[560] We cannot however be sure that these authors pictured the Delphic adyton as a cavern, since in Latin the word *antrum* acquired the meaning 'oracle', irrespective of the actual layout of a specific place.[561] Livy cites a tradition of a voice coming from a deep grotto,[562] perhaps accentuating the fact that the cavern was an artificial construction, but he also transforms the *pneuma* into an audible voice. Nonnus, in the fifth century AD, does the same, attributing a subterranean voice to the Delphic grotto.[563] However dubious they may be, late testimonies do not undermine the truthfulness of the rest of the tradition. To distrust it *en masse* because of a few inconsistencies would be to throw out the baby with the bath water.

In sum: since the fifth century BC the written tradition refers to the Delphic adyton as an artificial vault, located below the floor level of the rest of the temple. At that period, the god was believed to dwell in this grotto. The first accounts of the prophetic breath in the adyton are Hellenistic: *pneuma* is considered to be a material substance inspiring the Pythia to utter oracles.

Archaeology of the adyton

The site of Delphi has been excavated for more than a hundred years, primarily by l'École française en Grèce. Systematic excavations of the temple of Apollo started in 1893,[564] and their first results caused a major re-evaluation of the corpus of ancient written testimonies. From the viewpoint of the present discussion, the most important—and disappointing—result of these excavations is that almost

[560] Ovid, *Met.* 3. 14; Bömer 1969–80: 451; Prop. 3. 3. 13; Statius *Theb.* 1. 492; 3. 747; 3. 611–13; 8. 175; Sil. 3. 9; 12. 321–3.

[561] *TLL* 2, s.v. antrum.

[562] Liv. 1. 56. 10: *ex infimo specu vocem redditam ferunt.* Valerius Maximus in his account of Appius' consultation (1. 8. 10) reports the existence of an 'inner part of the sacred grotto' (*in intimam sacri specus partem*).

[563] *Dion.* 4. 290–3; 9. 270–4. Dio Cassius (62. 13. 2) introduces an additional detail: both he and Lucian (*Nero* 10) relate the story of Nero's sealing of the fissure (*stomion*) from which the prophetic vapour rose, but Cassius further adds that the fissure was filled with dead bodies.

[564] Courby 1927 presents the results of these excavations.

no remains of the interior of the temple have been discovered. The state of the adyton was especially deplorable: nothing but the foundations and sterile layer below them have survived.[565] The devastation is almost total, and hence appears deliberate.[566] É. Bourguet remarks bitterly: 'The last Pythia took her secret with her.'[567]

Mycenaean remains have been discovered in Delphi, but their connection to the late Geometric–Archaic site remains problematic. The site of the temple of Apollo was occupied from the late ninth–early eighth century.[568] The temple of Apollo unearthed by the French archaeologists was erected in the fourth century on the foundations of the sixth-century temple, which in its turn superseded a more ancient building. Religious conservatism and the needs of the new construction were balanced in the effort to preserve the sacred layout, which seems to have remained basically unaltered.[569] It is suggested that the fourth-century temple was moved slightly to the north of the earlier building.[570]

After the 373 earthquake, which caused displacement of the terrain under the temple, the reconstruction works continued for forty years. It would be unthinkable for the temple officials to allow prophecy-giving to be suspended for decades, and in order to perform her duties, the Pythia needed the traditional adyton. G. Roux consequently suggests that, contrary to the normal Greek practice, first the megaron was erected, in order to enable the cult practice in the temple, and later the peristyle. He concludes that, following this order, it would only be logical for the holy of holies to be constructed first.[571] J.-F. Bommelaer challenges this view, assuming that the order of rebuilding was traditional, but his arguments remain inconclusive.[572] Whatever the actual stages of erection of the fourth-century temple, they do not have direct bearing on the problem of the adyton. The adyton could remain in the same location even if constructed relatively late, or could be slightly moved even if the works started with its reconstruction.

[565] Ibid. 65–6; Will 1942/3: 161.

[566] Bourguet 1914: 249–50; Roux 1976: 93.

[567] Bourguet 1914: 250.

[568] Dietrich 1990: 170; cf. Roux 1976: 19–26, 35–6.

[569] Courby 1927: 62; Flacelière 1938: 70; de la Coste-Messelière 1969: 731, 741, 744; Roux 1976: 95; Delcourt 1981: 41; Coldstream 1985: 96.

[570] Bommelaer 1983.

[571] Roux 1976: 108–9.

[572] Bommelaer 1983: 201, 214.

The main space of the fourth-century temple, the megaron, features two uninterrupted rows of column bases, running all along its entire length. Thus, the adyton could be situated only between these rows, in the innermost part of the temple, that is, near the wall of the opisthodomus, and its dimensions were relatively modest: 5 × 5 m. In fact, at this spot the pavement of the megaron is interrupted,[573] and there is no material obstacle to location of a hollow there. Most noteworthy, this area is sunken, lying more than 2 m below the surrounding floor.[574] The bottom of this cavity did not reach the virgin rock, situated about 6 m below the floor of the megaron, which remained untouched even by the foundations of the temple. However, when the bedrock was reached during the archaeological excavations, it was found to be fissured.[575]

Thus, the *manteion* of the fourth-century temple seems to have been constructed artificially, and in all probability copied the pattern used in the previous temple, built after the fire of 548 by the Alcmaeonids and visited by the contemporaries of Aeschylus. In fact, as far as the mythological tradition goes, even in the legendary temple erected by Trophonius and Agamedes 'the adyton built of Pentelic stone'[576] was a skilful construction, rather than a natural cleft.

The temple of Apollo in Delphi deviated from the standard layout of a Greek temple in two crucial respects. First, its innermost part is sunken, indicating that the floor level there was lower than in the surrounding space. Secondly, the elaborate system of water channels in the foundations of the sixth-century temple indicates that an unusual ritual involving the use of water was performed in the lower-level space.[577] On the basis of the archaeological remains, as well as the references to the adyton in ancient literature, first F. Courby, and later G. Roux suggested reconstructions of the adyton. Notwithstanding

[573] Courby 1927: 47–55; Roux 1976: 106; Amandry 1997: 279–81. The pavement between the column bases has not disappeared or been destroyed: lateral blocks surrounding the opening have no slots for the bronze brackets which hold blocks together elsewhere in the temple, therefore they were not intended to be attached to other blocks.

[574] Courby 1927: 66, fig. 55; Roux 1976: 110; Suárez de la Torre 2005: 22.

[575] Courby 1927: 66. For the reasons of fissuring see below in this chapter.

[576] Steph. Byz., s.v. *Delphoi*; Courby 1927: 66.

[577] Roux 1976: 137–44; fig. 9, pl. 23, ill. 40; Parke 1967*a*: 76; Cole 1988: 162. Cf. the changes in the water flow of Castalia: Parke 1978: 217.

significant divergence in details, both excavators of the site agree that the prophetic chamber included an underground artificial grotto.[578]

People who descended into the holy of holies were still able to see what was happening in the megaron, therefore the adyton could have been about 2 m deep, most probably approached by stairs. The area of the adyton, indicated by the break in the pavement of the megaron and the rows of columns, could accommodate several participants in the ceremony, the Pythia, the priests, and the consulters who attended the ceremony. This was the *manteion* or *chrêstêrion.* In this place, the sacred ground of Parnassus was believed to be visible at the bottom of the hollow. The whole temple appears to have been erected in order to take in a strip of the prophetic ground.[579] Ancient authors report the tripod of the Pythia as located above the chasm in the earth. Plutarch even specifies that the prophetic breathing is emitted from a source in the adyton.[580] The tripod therefore could stand above an artificial hole, which allowed contact between the Pythia and the ground.[581] The diameter of the hole must have been small enough to fit the limited space of the adyton. We should not be misled by the modest dimensions of the cavern. In the ancient world, at least two fissures were believed to have absorbed all the waters of the deluge: the opening in the floor of the sanctuary of Gaia Olympia in Athens, which was just one cubit wide, and a 'very small'[582] hole in Hierapolis.

This grotto was called 'chasm in the earth', *chasma gês,* and 'cave', *spêlaion.* The 'artfully built' prophetic cavern of Trophonius in Lebadeia is also described in the same words, as *chasma gês* and *spêlaion.*[583] The foundation of the *manteion* in Lebadeia is explained by a myth involving a cavern, and the story of Coretas in Delphi serves the same purpose. It is impossible to ascertain when and where precisely the natural cleft was located in Delphi, because seismic activities in the area have caused displacements of the soil below the temple. No unequivocal archaeological evidence remains for the

[578] Courby 1927: 59–69, fig. 61; Roux 1976: 134–5, figs. 7 and 8; Roux 2000: 195, fig. 13; cf. Vallois 1931: 320; Parke 1939: 22; 27–30; Delcourt 1981: 42; Green 1989: 110.

[579] Roux 1976: 109.

[580] *Pêgê,* Plut. *Mor.* 437C.

[581] Vallois 1931: 322; Roux 1976: 112–13.

[582] Paus. 1. 18. 7; Lucian. *De dea Syria* 13.

[583] Paus. 9. 39. 3; 9; Strabo 9. 2. 38.

manteion in Lebadeia,[584] as is exactly the case in Delphi. The paradox is that nobody doubts the existence of the prophetic cave in Lebadeia, whereas until recently only a few scholars[585] believed that the Delphic adyton contained an artificial orifice.

As a result of his comparison of the archaeological remains discovered on the site of the temple, and the literary tradition, F. Courby assumes that 'the adyton (in a broad sense) consisted of a cavern in the inner part of the cella, and a small edifice above the orifice'.[586] G. Roux suggests that the floor of this chamber was below the floor of the rest of the temple, and that the adyton was not completely separated from the megaron, forming rather an inner and lower part of it.[587] In any case, the adyton at Delphi was modelled as a grotto, and had an opening into a fissure supposed to reach down into the depths of the Earth.

Geomorphology of the area of Delphi

Until recently, the common opinion of geologists was that the limestone and shale layer immediately beneath the temple of Apollo could never have emitted vapours.[588] Although local peasants saw vapours coming from clefts in rocks, and by J. Fontenrose's time no chemical analysis of these gases had been made, he pronounced that the gases 'had no special property'.[589] The prevailing prejudice among historians and archaeologists was that gaseous emissions could only be of volcanic origin.[590] These opinions have been adopted without further questioning by most present-day scholars writing on Delphi.[591]

[584] Bonnechere 2003: 7–26; see also above, Ch. 4.3.

[585] Such as Roux 1976: 134–5; Delcourt 1981: 142; to a certain extent Parke: Parke and Wormell 1956: i. 30.

[586] Courby 1927: 64.

[587] Roux 1976: 134–5, following Flacelière 1938: 89.

[588] Philippson 1901; Bousquet 1940/1; Birot 1959.

[589] Fontenrose 1978: 203.

[590] Amandry 1950: 219–20.

[591] Oppé 1904: 230; Parke 1939: 21; Parke and Wormell 1956: i. 22; Fontenrose 1978: 10, 203; Whittaker 1965: 23; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 172; Price 1985: 140; Kalogeropoulou 1973: 70; Morrison 1981: 100; Burkert 1985: 116; Morgan 1990: 151; Maass 1993; Rosenberger 2001: 53; Pedley 2005; Spawforth 2006: 171.

In 1995 an interdisciplinary team of scientists started a project of geological and archaeological exploration of the area of Delphi.[592] They succeeded in identifying the prophetic vapour and in demonstrating that both fracturing and emissions of intoxicating gases occurred under the temple of Apollo. These discoveries were so astounding that not only journals of popular science, but even daily newspapers reported them.[593] However, very few classical scholars appreciate the impact of the new finds.[594] The following paragraphs give a summary of the findings of this research project.

Delphi is located in a highly fractured zone, where major seismotectonic events disrupt deceptively quiet periods of gradually increasing strain. In 373 for instance, the destruction of the sixth-century temple at Delphi was part of such a major event, also causing the disappearance of two towns on the shore of the Gulf of Corinth below sea level. Existence of the Delphi fault has been known for some time. J. Z. de Boer and J. R. Hale identified another fault in the area of Delphi, which they called the Kerna fault,[595] along which are located the springs of the ancient site. These intersections provided pathways for rising waters, including a spring below Apollo's temple.[596] The two faults intersect below the temple of Apollo, creating an exceptionally dynamic geological situation:

> Because cross-faulting happened to occur on a steep slope, the weakened mountainside underwent massive rock slides . . . When ancient authors mentioned a chasm in the inner sanctum of the temple, they were most likely describing a minor extensional fracture associated with the north-west-trending Kerna fault, at or near its intersection with the Delphi fault.[597]

This combination of faults, bituminous limestone with a high petrochemical content, and rising water created an unusual geological situation in Delphi, in which gaseous discharges 'have been and continue to be produced in the bedrock underlying the oracular site'.[598] Hydrocarbon

[592] De Boer and Hale 2001; de Boer *et al.* 2001; Spiller *et al.* 2002.

[593] Hale *et al.* 2003; Haghfield 2001; Gugliotta 2002.

[594] Ogden 2001: 245; Bowden 2005: 19; Curnow 2004: 56; Mikalson 2005: 106.

[595] The presence of this fault is also suggested by Higgins and Higgins (1996), cited by de Boer and Hale (Hale *et al.* 2003).

[596] De Boer and Hale 2001: 399.

[597] De Boer *et al.* 2001: 708–9.

[598] Ibid. 709.

gases rose to the surface along fault zones, especially in periods after tectonic activity, when limestone was heated to a temperature causing petrochemicals to vaporize.

Samples of water from the Kerna spring, as well as samples of travertine deposited in the fonts active in antiquity, have been analysed. The waters of the ancient springs contained light hydrocarbon gases, methane and ethane; water of the active Kerna spring yields another light hydrocarbon gas, ethylene. It is most likely that ethylene was present in the waters of the ancient sources, but due to its chemical characteristics it cannot be preserved in travertine deposits. Methane and ethane are colourless and can produce mild narcotic effects.[599] 'Ethylene in particular was probably a significant component in the oracular sessions, because it has a sweet smell, which fits the description of Plutarch.'[600] It was used as a surgical anaesthetic till the 1970s, and in light doses, it allows full control of the body, but creates a sensation of euphoria. H. A Spiller, J. R. Hale, and J. Z. de Boer observe that 'in some cases a more violent reaction may occur, including delirium and frantic thrashing of limbs. Eventually, the anesthetic properties of ethylene can cause complete unconsciousness or even death.'[601] If inhaled in sufficient concentrations, which would be achievable in the relatively confined space of the adyton, these gases could have induced the Pythia's trance. The conduct of the Pythia (as described in ancient sources) recalls descriptions of the impact on modern patients of administration of mild anaesthesia via inhalational anaesthetic gases.[602] The experience of the philosopher William Jones, who experimented with mild anaesthesia in the late nineteenth–early twentieth century, verifies that these substances can induce visionary states.[603] The behaviour of present-day 'huffers', teenage drug users, after inhalation of fumes from glue and other substances containing light hydrocarbon gases, is reminiscent in many respects of the benign trance of the Pythia.[604]

Geological phenomena similar to those observed in Delphi are known elsewhere in the world. Three observations are particularly relevant to the problem of the exhalations in the Delphic adyton.

[599] Spiller *et al.* 2002: 192–3. [600] De Boer *et al.* 2001: 709.
[601] Ibid. 709. [602] Spiller *et al.* 2002: 193.
[603] Ibid. 194. [604] Hale *et al.* 2003.

First, recent studies of vents in the Gulf of Mexico, in a geological setting very similar to that in Delphi, have shown that gas flow starts and stops at intervals, and can be triggered by seismic activities; in Delphi, as Plutarch notes, the flow of *pneuma* changed with time. This could have been due to short-term fluctuations in gas content resulting from temperature variations or dilution by increased water flow during heavy rains. Secondly, gas release occurs only during periods of relatively high ground-water temperatures; in Delphi the prophetic activities were suspended during the winter months, when ground-water temperatures were low.[605] Finally, spaces in the fault zone are gradually clogged with calcite, and this process reduces the gas discharge. Motion along the fault reopens these pathways. In Delphi, earthquakes could have been responsible for renewed releases of the hydrocarbon gases, as well as 'silencing' springs and closing fissures, including the one(s) below the temple.[606] The bedrock below the temple was fissured, as the excavations demonstrated.[607] The *chasma* could therefore be a fissure in the faulted bedrock, extending into the clay layer immediately below the adyton.

Another gas discharged by bituminous limestone is hydrogen sulphite, which emits an odour of rotten eggs. It is the first gas released during seismic agitation. Delphi's archaic name, Pytho, is said to derive from *puthô*, 'to rot', because the body of the snake slain by Apollo rotted there.[608] Was it an attempt to explain the occasional foetid smell felt in the adyton from time to time?[609] It is noteworthy that the waters of the Castalia spring yield only small quantities of methane, that is, the sites of hydrocarbon emissions in the area of Delphi vary in output, which means that in antiquity the choice of a specific locale for specific cultic activities was not accidental.

[605] De Boer and Hale 2001: 407–8. [606] Ibid. 409–11.

[607] See above in this chapter; Courby 1927: 66. F. Courby suggested that the bedrock had been fissured by water.

[608] *H. Ap.* 371–2; Strabo 9. 3. 5. Guardian giant snake of ambiguous gender, either female Delphyne: *H. Ap.* 300; Apol. Rhod. 2. 706; Plut. *Mor.* 414B), or male Python (Eur. *Iph. Taur.* 1244–6; Paus. 2. 30. 3; 10. 6. 6; Apollod. 1. 4. 1; Hygin. 140; *IDelph.* III. 2. 137, 138; Furley and Bremer 2001: i. 135–136, ii. 84–92. Only after Apollo had defeated Python in combat, did he acquire the Delphic oracle (Plut. *Mor.* 417F; Delcourt 1981: 34–5). In later rationalistic versions the reptile turned into a lawless robber (Strabo 9. 3. 11; Paus. 10. 6. 6).

[609] De Boer and Hale 2001: 408. In fact, the name of the snake derives from the place name, Pytho or Delphi.

Since different individuals react to various substances in different ways, women chosen to serve as Pythiae were presumably more receptive than most to the effect of the gases, therefore, while enquirers and temple officials present at the prophetic séances smelt the vapours, they did not experience trance or visions. Psychological and physiological factors, such as the Pythia's faith in her vocation and her preparation for the séance, must also be taken into account. In all probability, Plutarch's and Lucan's descriptions record cases of exceptional reaction of the Pythia or of overdose.

Thus, after a century of disbelief, the ancient tradition declared 'unsatisfactory' by Oppé[610] has been proven to offer quite an accurate account of the layout of the temple and ritual at Delphi. In fact, almost simultaneously with exploration of Delphi by the team of J. Z. de Boer and J. R. Hale, another piece of ancient evidence on a cave and vapours was verified by modern scientists: the description of the poisonous gaseous discharge in the Plutonium at Hierapolis (Pamukkale) was found to be absolutely accurate.[611] Moreover, the sacred enclosure at Hierapolis includes a temple of Apollo which was directly connected to the gas-emitting hole. This feature, as well as the position of the temple in Hierapolis above an active fault, is immediately reminiscent of the Delphic sanctuary.

Symbolism of the adyton

The recent geological discoveries, which verify the presence of vapours in Delphi, prove that ancient accounts of *pneuma* at Delphi are accurate. The role of *pneuma* in Pythia's inspiration has finally been acknowledged and even found its way to the pages of the introduction to the study of Greek religion recently published by J. D. Mikalson in the Blackwell Ancient Religions series.[612] Yet notwithstanding the reassessment of the ancient tradition on *pneuma*, testimonies regarding the existence of a submerged vault in the Delphic adyton are still misinterpreted. Very few authors now assume that the holy of holies at Delphi was an artificial vault. Thus, it

[610] Oppé 1904: 233. [611] Above, Ch. 2.2.

[612] Mikalson 2005: 106; see also Ogden 2001: 245; Curnow 2004: 56; Bowden 2005: 19.

is essential that written accounts of the layout of the Delphic adyton are basically coherent in their own right, and cannot be disregarded in their entirety as fallacious nuisance.

The re-examination of the literary, archaeological, and geological evidence brings about several corollaries. The first one concerns the layout of the adyton and the source of the Pythia's inspiration. The inner sanctum at Delphi was an artificial vault, which most probably contained an orifice allowing contact between the Pythia and the soil underlying the temple. Hydrocarbon gases issuing from the bedrock could reach the Pythia and act, alongside other factors of religious and psychological nature, to induce in her a state of trance. The fluctuations in the gas flow rendered the layout of the prophetic nook even more important: during the periods when the concentration of gas was low, the Pythia could nevertheless receive inside the closed chamber the minimal quantity of gas necessary to attain the state of *enthusiasmos*.

The dependence of the Pythia on the gas discharge may account for the myths of the first incumbents of Delphi, most of them crediting Gaia with primeval ownership of the oracle.[613] According to the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* and the preserved fragments of Alcaeus' *Hymn to Apollo*,[614] the oracle was founded by Apollo himself. Gaia and Themis as the first mistresses of the oracle appear only early in the fifth century, in Aeschylus and in Pindar, but the similarity between the accounts of the two poets indicates that they probably echo an earlier tradition. In any case, by the beginning of the fifth century it was the involvement of chthonic primordial deities that provided a solution to the mystery of divination at Delphi, and both Gaia and Poseidon were revered in Delphi alongside Apollo. In order to comprehend the association of the Delphic

[613] Aeschyl. *Eumen.* 1–8; Pind. fr. 55 Maehler, Schol. Aesch. *Eum.* 2; Eurip. *Iphig. Taur.* 1244–6; Diod. 16. 26; Plut. *Mor.* 402CE; *IDelph.* III. 2. 191. Themis is considered Apollo's predecessor as the incumbent of Delphi by Ephorus (*FGH* 70 F31b, Strabo 9. 3. 11–12), Apollodorus (1. 4. 1) and by Lucan (*De bello civili* 5. 81). Poseidon is the first owner of Delphi in several myths: *FGH* 70 F 150; Strabo 8. 6. 14; Paus. 10. 5. 6 (jointly with Gaia). On the myths of the first incumbents of Delphi, see Parke 1939: 6–17; Parke and Wormell 1956: i. 3–9; Amandry 1950: 201–14; Béquignon 1949; Lloyd-Jones 1976: 61; Roux 1976: 19–34, 45–51; Fontenrose 1974; Dietrich 1992: 43; Quantin 1992; Rosenberger 2001: 20–1; Sourvinou-Inwood 1987; Furley and Bremer 2001: i. 96; Dietrich 1990: 170; Dietrich 1992: 43.

[614] Fr. 142 Page 1962; Halliday 1928: 69–70; Page 1955: 244, 250.

oracle with the chthonic powers, we do not necessarily need to search for actual remains of pre-Archaic female cults.[615] Since the prophetic gas which played the vital role in the process of divination was issued from the Earth, Apollo, the god of prophecy *par excellence*, had to be provided with chthonic predecessors. The most suitable candidates were Gaia the mistress of the Earth and Poseidon the savage god of earthquakes and springs, whose will changed the flow of the gas in the fissure and of the water in the sacred springs.

We can now reassess the symbolism of the adyton. The chasm connects the adyton to the depths of the earth. The omphalos represents the navel of the world, while the laurel tree symbolizes its summit, and from this tree Apollo himself speaks in the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*.[616] Accordingly, the inner sanctum of the Delphic temple, considered the umbilical centre of the cosmos, comprises its two extremities, linking the highest and the lowest spheres. The action in the adytum is focused on the Pythia, who conveys the words of the god. As M. West observes, 'It is particularly striking that she sits on a cauldron supported by a tripod. This eccentric perch can hardly be explained except as a symbolic boiling, and as such it looks very much like a reminiscence of the initiatory boiling of the shaman, translated from hallucinatory experience into concrete visual terms.'[617]

In fact, initiation dreams that include such ordeals as dismemberment, excarnation, cooking of the future shaman, and subsequent rebirth, are well-attested to worldwide as the start of a shamanic career.[618] Greeks myths on devouring or boiling of gods and heroes, followed by their reincarnation, may be interpreted as reflecting initiation rituals.[619] Thus, the Greeks did not need to adopt from any

[615] Apollo's inheritance of the oracle from a hypothetical Aegean mother goddess has been conjectured by Farnell 1907: iv. 193; Parke 1939: 9; Béquignon 1949; Amandry 1950: 205–9; Dietrich 1978: 5; refuted by Sourvinou-Inwood 1987; Suárez de la Torre 1998: 63, 75; Furley and Bremer 2001: i. 96; Dietrich 1990: 170; 1992: 43; Georgoudi 1998: 322. The nature of the influence of earlier cults on Archaic Delphi remains controversial: Quantin 1992: 179. On chthonic aspects in the Delphic cult of Apollo see Lambrinoudakis 2000.

[616] Line 396.

[617] West 1983: 147; cf. West 1997*a*: 150; Dietrich 1990: 167.

[618] Eliade 1974: 43–4; Halifax 1991: 12, 50; Kilborne 1987: 489.

[619] Lycophron (1315) hints that Jason, a shamanic character, was cut into pieces and rejuvenated in Colchis, before he obtained the fleece. Simonides (fr. 548 *PMG*) and Pherecydes (*FGH* 3 F 113a) include Jason in their lists of those rejuvenated, i.e.

foreign people the idea of the tripod as the symbol of the Pythia's vocation: as argued above, the similarity between some Greek myths and the shamanic lore ensues from the cross-cultural pattern of the initiatory experience.[620] In Delphi, the juxtaposition of the upper, middle, and netherworlds created a place appropriate for communication between these realms, accomplished by the divinely inspired medium, the Pythia, whose distinction was symbolized by her installation on the cauldron.

In summary, in Delphi the holy of holies was an artificial grotto. There the Pythia experienced a state of trance, which was induced by inhalation of hydrocarbon gases emitted from the fissure in the bedrock. Thus, similar to many other prophetic caves, the Delphic cavern served as a place where the medium attained altered states of consciousness, but unlike most other oracular centres, the method employed there relied on the use of narcotic gases rather than on sensory deprivation.

CONCLUSIONS

Oracles were located in caves for two main reasons: either the cave environment provided isolation which caused sensory deprivation and subsequent trance, or the cave served as a closed chamber, where poisonous gases accumulated in concentrations sufficient to induce altered states of consciousness. Seclusion and sensory deprivation seem to have been the most essential factors of revelation in the majority of oracles of the Nymphs and Pan, as well as in the Trophonium and in the oracles of Apollo at Claros and Ptoion. In several cases it is impossible to distinguish between incubation in a cave for

cut up and boiled, by Medea. At this stage of his life Jason was quite young and did not need to be invigorated. The accounts by Lycophron, Simonides, and Pherecydes reflect perhaps a misinterpretation of the Jason's shamanic initiation (Ustinova 2005*b*: 512). On the Orphic myth of the dismemberment of Dionysus by the Titans, followed by his resurrection, and of Pentheus in the *Bacchae*, as 'projections of the experience of the mystic initiand', see Seaford 2006: 52, 85, 112; Linforth 1941: 307–64; Detienne 1977: 164–207; West 1983: 74, 140–75; Graf and Johnston 2007: 81–4.

[620] Ch. 1.5.

the purpose of obtaining prophetic dreams, and prolonged sojourn in a cave in order to achieve trance and subsequent revelations: the difference between dreaming, reverie, and trance is very rarely indicated in the sources. The oracles of the dead, of Amphiaraus, and the ancient shrine of Asclepius at Tricca belong to this indistinct category of oracles based on either trance or dreams.

Poisonous gases are reported in the caves along the Meander valley, both those considered entrances to the netherworld and the oracle of Apollo at Hieracome. The most splendid example of an oracle focused on a cavern with euphoriant gases is of course Delphi. However, Delphi is not unique: the precinct in Hierapolis resembles the Delphic sanctuary in two respects, the connection between the temple of Apollo and a hole emitting gases, and the position of the temple above an active fault.

As a rule, modern Westerners distinguish between artificial and natural caves, while the Greeks indiscriminately applied the same words, usually *antron*, *spêlaion*, or *stomion*, both to real caverns and to their man-made imitations. This word usage seems to indicate that the Greeks put the emphasis on the function and symbolism of grottoes, rather than on their technological and visual aspects. The most prominent characteristic shared by natural caves and artificial grottoes is that they provide isolation, complete or partial, from the world, its fresh air, light, sounds, human society, and other distractions.

Some oracular caves, for instance the grotto at Ptoion, were not very deep, and could not be light- and sound-proof. However, as we have already seen, even a decrease in or impairment of sensory input, especially if enhanced by fasting and other austerities, could be inductive to altered states of consciousness, including (vatic) visions.[621] Partial isolation could also affect the concentration of poisonous gases within a space. On the other hand, the choice of natural caverns or construction of artificial grottoes for the purposes of inspired divination could follow the age-old tradition associating vaticination with caves: even a small cave could serve as a symbol of inspired prophecy.

Some centres of divination based on techniques that did not involve inspiration, such as lot oracles, were also located in caves.

[621] Ch. 1.3.

In these cases cleromancy either replaced inspired divination which appears to have been originally practised at the site, or emerged as an attempt at imitation of more venerable oracles belonging to the same or related deities.

Inspired divination was in many cases based on direct contact between the god and the consulter. Even if we assume that at the Trophonium enquirers who did not appear likely candidates for surrender to trance were segregated at the stage of preliminary ceremonies, their number remained limited. Cases of alteration of consulters' consciousness and ensuing reports of divine revelations must have been common enough to allow institutions like the Trophonium to operate smoothly. Apparently visitors to caves sacred to the Nymphs did not necessarily become nympholepts, but their trances were sufficiently frequent to inspire numerous jokes and allusions, like those in Menander's *The Bad-Tempered Man*. Thus, cave experiences of ordinary Greeks were quite widespread.

In addition, well-established oracular centres like Delphi and Claros employed full-time intermediaries of the gods. Although the neurological mechanisms of their trances and revelations did not differ from those of laymen, their ascetic lifestyle, expertise, and natural proclivity allowed them to manipulate their consciousness much more efficiently. As a result, their predictions were especially impressive and well-known—as well as their oracular techniques. Prophetic priests, members of sacred embassies, sent to Delphi and Claros by cities all over the Mediterranean, private consulters who applied to these oracles for advice, and individuals who personally experienced altered states of consciousness in caves—all these people knew that descent into caves evoked noetic sensations.

3

Seers and Poets

Seers know the future, the hidden past, and the present, and they are divinely inspired. However, as freelance 'impresarios of the gods', they are much more independent than religious personnel of established oracular shrines. Itinerant or living permanently in a certain place, considering a certain god their patron *par excellence* or entirely self-reliant, they are less limited by cultic traditions and autonomous in many of their choices. Most famous seers are legendary or semi-legendary figures. In this case, what actually matters for our discussion is not whether a particular piece of information on a vatic person is historical, quasi-historical, or non-historical: the important question is what the Greeks deemed appropriate to a seer. The aspiration of this chapter is therefore to envisage the mental frame of seers, their behaviour, method of attaining illumination, and especially the role of cave experiences in their lives.

1. SIBYLS

The Sibyl in the Greek world

The earliest appearance of the Sibyl in Greek literature is thrilling.[1] She is introduced dramatically in a fragment of Heraclitus (sixth century), cited by Plutarch: 'The Sibyl, uttering with mad mouth

[1] The most complete and insightful study of the Sibyls is Parke 1988. *Excursus* 1, *Ad Sibyllinos libros* in Alexandre 1856: 1–101 is still valuable as a compendium of the testimonies on the Sibylline tradition.

(*mainomenôi stomati*) cheerless, unembellished, unperfumed words, reaches to a thousand years with her voice given by the god (*têi phônêi dia ton theon*).'[2] The core of the prophetess' personality is disclosed here. The Sybil is inspired by the god to whom her voice belongs, which makes her mouth 'mad'. The Sibyl's madness indicates that the utterances are delivered in a state of prophetic trance. The words of the Sibyl are unpolished and her predictions gloomy. They encompass inconceivably long periods, stretching into the distant future: it is quite possible that Heraclitus was already familiar with the collections of Sibylline oracles, predicting faraway events.[3] Sibylline prophecies are also attested to at an early date on Samos: late eighth–early seventh-century Samian records, cited by Eratosthenes, refer to the existence of oracles attributed to the Sibyl.[4]

The origin of the word 'sibyl' remains obscure.[5] In the sixth and the fifth centuries, the Sibyl is referred to in the singular.[6] Multiple Sibyls make their appearance in a fragment from *Concerning Oracle-Centres*, a fourth-century work by Heraclides of Pontus,[7] numbering as many as ten in a quotation from Varro, a second-century AD scholar.[8]

Pausanias knows of three Sibyls,[9] although he usually speaks of one only. He says that the first Sibyl was Herophile, who lived before the Trojan War. She was the first woman to chant oracles. In her poem she calls herself not only Herophile, but also Artemis, a wedded wife of Apollo, and his daughter. Pausanias emphasizes that she makes these statements in a state of *mania* and possession by the god. Herophile is said to have travelled all over the Aegean. When in

[2] *Mor.* 397; *DK* fr. 92. While estimations of the length of the authentic fragment of Heraclitus in this passage range from the whole sentence to the words 'the Sibyl with mad mouth' only, the latter judgement appears too radical: Parke 1988: 63; cf. Delatte 1934: 6; Kahn 1979: 124–6.

[3] Aune 1983: 37; for a list of related testimonies see Alexandre 1856: 8–9.

[4] *FGH* 241 F26; Parke 1988: 53–64. It is suggested that the cave of Spiliani on Samos not only housed a cult of the Nymphs, but was also the abode of the local Sibyl, as in Erythrae (Parke 1988: 99).

[5] Aune 1983: 37; Bate 1918: 9.

[6] Heracl. *Mor.* 397; *DK* fr. 92; Aristophanes *Pax* 1095, 1116; Plato, *Phaedr.* 244B; *Theag.* 124D; Parke 1988: 23.

[7] Clement. Alex. *Strom.* 1. 21. 108; fr. 130 Wehrli.

[8] Lactant. *Div. inst.* 1. 6; Schol. in Plato *Phaedr.* 244B; cf. the list in Suida, s.v. *Sibulla*. Alexandre 1856: 5–7; Parke 1988: 24–50; Potter 1990: 473–4.

[9] Paus. 10. 12. 1–11.

Delphi, she sat on a rock known as the Sibyl's rock, and sang her prophecies. Pausanias also mentions the second Sibyl, Demo of Cumae, and finally, the 'Oriental' Sibyl Sabbe, known either as a Hebrew or as a Babylonian or Egyptian Sibyl.[10]

Heraclitus' portrait of the Sibyl is almost identical to Aeschylus' description of Cassandra, tortured by her visions of the future, frantic when putting them in words.[11] Cassandra was a Trojan princess, whereas Marpessus in the Troad claimed to be the home of the first Sibyl.[12] Both Cassandra and the Sibyl were wooed by Apollo, but preferred to preserve their chastity. Like the Sibyl, granted longevity by Apollo, but denied eternal youth,[13] Cassandra received a gift from him, but was denied the means to profit from it: she predicted the truth, but nobody believed her.[14] As in the case of the Sibyl, Cassandra's biography includes a sojourn in a cave: ashamed of her raving fits, Priam jailed her in a cavern, which serves as the *mise-en-scène* for Lycophron's *Alexandra*.[15] The choice of place of imprisonment appears odd: other Greek princesses were detained by their fathers in locked chambers in their palaces. Cassandra's incarceration in a cavern reflects perhaps an early association of the prophetess with a cave. In any case, the clairvoyant Cassandra is kept in her solitary confinement, alone with her visions.

The problem of the early Sibyl's historicity is insoluble,[16] and the lack of clarity as to whether she really lived and where does not affect the appreciation of the Sibyl as a type of prophetic figure, an image that was created in the cultural context of the Archaic period (the eighth–sixth centuries), most probably in west Asia Minor.[17] The Sibyl's lifestyle as itinerant prophet was not unknown in archaic Greece, where purifiers, prophets, and healers wandered from city to city.[18]

[10] Paus. 10. 12. 3, 9. For the growth in the number of Sibyls from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period, and their lists, see Parke 1988: 100–35.

[11] Aesch. *Agamem.* 1035–1330; Mazzoldi 2001: 94–7; 2002.

[12] Paus. 10. 12. 4–6; Parke 1988: 25–6, 37–9; Alexandre 1856: 21–33. Lycophron calls Cassandra Alexandra, while one of the names of the Cumaean Sibyl was Taraxandra (Alexandre 1856: 29).

[13] Ovid. *Met.* 14. 130.

[14] Alexandre 1856: 17; Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: ii. 148; iii. 149; Bate 1918: 8; Nikiprowetsky 1970: 3; Parke 1988: 55–8; Clark 1979: 206; Graf 1985: 338–9; Mazzoldi 2001: 19–23, 107–10; Cusset 2004.

[15] 1461–71, cf. Nikiprowetsky 1970: 3; Parke 1988: 16, 56–7; Cusset 2004: 54.

[16] Potter 1990: 475.

[17] Graf 1985: 346; Parke 1988: 51–70; Potter 1990: 475; Mazzoldi 2001: 103.

[18] Burkert 1983.

The early Sibyl emerges as an inspired prophetess, whose vatic talent is ascribed either to her being the daughter of a Nymph,[19] or to her possession by Apollo.[20] The association with Apollo may reflect the predominance of Apolline oracles (Didyma, Claros, Delphi) during the Archaic period, with ensuing attribution of every mantic revelation to this god.[21] However, the earliest evidence on the Sibylline prophecy comes from the cities where Apollo's worship was far from being dominant: the pantheon of Ephesus was dominated by Artemis, and that of Samos by Hera.[22] In fact, Sibylline and Apolline prophecy differ in several respects. The Sibyl's prophecies were spontaneous and unsolicited: we never hear about enquirers posing questions to the Sibyl and receiving responses.[23] In contrast to oracular responses given at Delphi and elsewhere, the Sibyl does not provide guidance, but rather communicates her inspired visions of inevitable fate.[24] Unlike the Pythia who was the mouthpiece of the god and spoke as if she were Apollo, the Sibyl (and Cassandra) preserves her personality and sometimes even addresses the god in her prophecies: 'She is essentially a clairvoyante rather than a medium.'[25]

Collections of Sibylline oracles are reported in the fifth century at the latest, and most probably at least a century earlier: by the sixth century the tradition has already arrived in Italy.[26] The oracles are rendered in hexameter verse. Attempts to systematize the increasing number of these books and their wide circulation may explain the splitting of one Sibyl into several persons.[27] The expansion of the Greek world after Alexander's conquests may have caused the appearance of new books of prophecy, attributed to oriental Sibyls.[28] In the sixth century AD, the

[19] Parke 1988: 58.

[20] Phlegon in the 2nd cent. AD cites a negative version: the Erythraean Sibyl claimed that Apollo, jealous of her talent, deprived her of the vatic abilities (*FGH* 257 F37).

[21] Parke 1988: 59.

[22] Ibid. 64–5, cf. Nikiprowetsky 1970: 3 on the rivalry between the Sibylline prophecy and the Delphic oracle.

[23] Virgil's depiction of the Sibyl (*Aen.* 6. 42) is historically suspect, being the only instance of a Sibyl uttering responses, Aune 1983: 355.

[24] Parke 1988: 7.

[25] Ibid. 10; Mazzoldi 2001: 99–114.

[26] Aristoph. *Pax* 1095; Parke 1988: 103–4; Potter 1990.

[27] Aune 1983: 37.

[28] Potter 1990: 478.

Sibylline oracles were assembled in the form which has survived to the present day, a mixture of texts belonging to various ages and religious backgrounds, from pagan to Jewish to Christian.[29]

Caves provide a location for several Sibyls, who are born, live, die, or prophesy in various grottoes.[30] Sibyls resemble in this respect the Nymphs, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus referred to a Sybil as a 'local oracle-singing Nymph'.[31] Lamia, a monster who lived in a solitary cave, was the mother of the Libyan Sibyl.[32] Although several cities contested for the honour to be the birthplace of the first Sibyl, Herophile, the people of Erythrae maintained that she was born in a cave on Mt Corycos, in their land.[33] This cave has been discovered near the site of the ancient Erythrae. In antiquity, a spring issued from it. One of the inscriptions discovered there says 'With good luck. The Erythraean Sibyl, daughter of a Nymph and Theodorus', thus reflecting the version of Herophile's birth cited by Pausanias. Another inscription, a lengthy poem, starts with the same statement of the Sibyl's origin, and proceeds to other events from her biography, such as the 900-year-long lifespan as a virgin, singing prophecy from a rock, and travelling all over the world.[34] It is plausible that the cave was considered the Sibyl's burial place as well.[35] Both inscriptions are dated to the second half of the second century AD.[36] It is noteworthy that only in Erythrae did the Sibyl enjoy a cult, as coins with the inscription 'the goddess Sibyl' (*thea Sibulla*) testify.[37] However, the need to emphasize the Sibyl's divinity highlights the exceptional character of the cult: outside the Troad the Sibyl remained a mortal of remarkable longevity.

[29] Bate 1918; Parke 1988: 1–22.

[30] Alexandre 1856: 3; Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: i. 369–70; ii. 149–50; Knight 1967: 165; Bloch 1991: 56.

[31] 1. 55: *epikhôria Numphê khrêsmôidos*.

[32] Lamia's dwelling: Diod. Sic. 20. 41; Suda, Hesych., *Etym. Magnum*, s.v. *Lamia*; Knight 1967: 165; Alexandre 1856: 41–2, 74–9. The Libyan's Sibyl mother: Paus. 10. 12. 1; Plut. *Mor.* 398C. This myth was first mentioned by Euripides in two plays: Fr. 472m and 312 Kannicht-Snell, with comm. Parke 1988: 37–8, 104 considers this version to be Euripides' invention.

[33] Paus. 10. 12. 7; Alexandre 1856: 9–11, 19; Parke 1988: 108–10; Graf 1985: 340–3.

[34] *I. Erythr. und Klaz.* 224, 225, 226; Buresch 1892: 17–21; Reinach 1891: 280–2; Corssen 1913: 1–4; Graf 1985: 335–7.

[35] Reinach 1891: 282.

[36] Buresch 1892: 19.

[37] Eitrem 1945: 91; Alexandre 1856: 19; Graf 1985: 335; Parke 1988: 109.

Sibylline prophecy in Italy

The earliest Roman reference to a Sibyl in Italy is by the third-century dramatist Naevius. In the *Punic War* he mentions Aeneas' consultation of 'a Sibyl living in the town of Cimmerians'.[38] In his quasi-chronological list of the Sibyls, Varro locates the Cimmerian Sibyl between her Delphian and the Erythraean counterparts.[39] The Cimmerian Sibyl is an obscure figure. She emerged possibly as a result of Naevius' elaboration of Ephorus' depiction of the *nekuomanteion* at Lake Avernus.[40] Propertius and Silius Italicus refer to the Sibyl of Avernus,[41] whereas Virgil in *Aeneid* 6 conflates the Cimmerian Sibyl with the Cumaean: the latter leads Aeneas to the awesome cave at Avernus, the entrance to Hades.[42] Whether poetic figment or a reflection of the local cultic tradition, the Cimmerian Sibyl is always described as a mistress of a subterranean abode, immersed in eternal night.

At Lilybaeum in Sicily, the Sibyl was said to have lived and been buried in a cavern with a source, presumably a site of an indigenous cult.[43] Although the references to the Sybil's cavern are rather late, the Sibylline legend may have reached Sicily at a much earlier date. A church of John the Baptist was erected above this grotto, and in modern times has attracted pilgrims seeking remedy for their diseases.[44] The water from the grotto was deemed to cure those who drank it and to endow them with the gift of divination, or at least the ability to foretell their own future. Another Italian Sibyl who lived in a cave is Albunea, listed by Lactantius as the Tiburtine Sibyl. Her abode was a grotto by the banks of the River Anio at Tibur.[45]

[38] Fr. 12 Strzelecki; Serv. in Verg. *Aen.* 9. 17; Lavagne 1988: 484; Champeaux 2004: 47.

[39] Lactant. *Div. inst.* 1. 6; Bloch 1940: 22; cf. Parke 1988: 33, 72–4.

[40] Parke 1988: 74, Alexandre 1856: 54; Clark 1979: 205; cf. Austin 1977: 56.

[41] Prop. 4. 1. 49; Sil. Ital. 13. 400–895. The catabasis pictured in the *Punica* draws on the Homeric *Nekuia* and on *Aeneid* 6, although contrary to Virgil, Silius Italicus distinguishes between the Sibyl of Cumae and the Sibyl of Avernus, cf. Reitz 1982.

[42] Clark 1979: 207.

[43] Iulius Solinus, *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* 5. 7 (3rd–4th cent. AD), cf. Tac. *Ann.* 6. 12; Pace 1945: 3: 499.

[44] Eitrem 1945: 87, 118; Alexandre 1856: 71–4.

[45] Lactantius 1. 16. 2; Hor. *Odes* 1. 7. 12; Tibul. 2. 5. 69–70. Virgil gives her name to a location in the midst of a forest, where an incubation oracle of Faunus was situated near a spring and source of a mephitic gas (*Aen.* 7. 81–101); Alexandre 1856: 70; Nisbet and Hubbard 1975: 100–1; Palmer 1974: 80–9, 123.

The most famous among the Italian Sibyls, and perhaps among all the Sibyls known to the Roman world, was the Sibyl of Cumae. The first Greek author to mention her was Timaeus of Tauromenium,[46] who lived in the late fourth–early third century. The early tradition already pictures the Cumaean Sibyl dwelling in a cave.[47] This cave is probably that described by Lycophron as the place 'where the virgin Sibyl has her terrible dwelling, a yawning cavern with vaulted roof'.[48] Cumae is not mentioned explicitly in this passage, but these verses are part of a depiction of the mythological landscape of Italy.[49] A third-century collection of marvels refers to the 'subterranean chamber (*thalamos katageios*) of the Sibyl' at Cumae, and specifies her Erythraean origin.[50]

The most renowned description of the Cumaean Sibyl in literature is one of the great scenes of Virgil's *Aeneid*, namely Aeneas' consultation of the Sibyl in book 6.[51] The prophetess named Deiphobe[52] is portrayed there as an aged priestess of Apollo, inspired directly by the god (but contrary to the Pythia, not possessed by him). She is also the priestess of Trivia, identified both as Hecate the goddess of crossroads and Diana the mistress of the netherworld.[53] The association with Hecate enables Virgil to make his Sibyl lead Aeneas to the oracle of the dead at Avernus.[54] In the *Aeneid*, the Sibyl practises two modes of divination, oral utterances inspired by Apollo and predictions written on palm leaves.[55] When she utters her prophecy, the Sibyl's face changes colour, her breast heaves, her voice's timbre is altered, she even looks taller, and 'her heart swells with wild frenzy'.[56] Virgil's seer rages exactly like the Sibyl depicted by Heraclitus:[57] 'But the prophetess, not yet brooking the

[46] Bloch 1940: 22. [47] Potter 1990: 477.

[48] Vv. 1278–80: *stugnon . . . oikêstêrion gronôi berethrôi sugkatêrephes stegês*; cf. Cusset 2004: 57.

[49] Parke 1988: 71–2.

[50] Pseudo-Arist., *De mirabilibus auscultationibus* 95, 838A5; Parke 1988: 78.

[51] The literature on this scene is vast, see Hardie 1969: 24.

[52] Different authors give the Cumaean Sibyl five different names (Eitrem 1945: 89).

[53] Ver. *Aen.* 6. 35. cf. 118, 247, 564; Eitrem 1945: 97–108; Fletcher 1962: 31.

[54] Knight 1967: 165; Parke 1988: 79–80.

[55] *Aen.* 3. 443–53; 6. 77, 74; Eitrem 1945: 108–13.

[56] *Aen.* 6. 45–50: *et rabie fera corda tument.*

[57] Norden 1916: 144–7 on the erotic connotations of this description, against the background of the myths of Apollo's attentions to the Sibyl; cf. Austin 1977: 66.

sway of Phoebus, storms wildly in the cavern,[58] if so she may shake the mighty god from off her breast; so much the more he tries her raving mouth, tames her wild heart, and moulds her by constraint' (translation by H. Rushton Fairclough).[59]

The early history of the Cumaean Sibyl is obscure. The Sibyl was a powerful figure in Ionia, and the Sibylline tradition in Cumae must originate from there. Parke suggests that the Sibyl enjoyed a cult, which was not founded by the original settlers coming from Cyme in Aeolis, where no pre-Roman Sibylline tradition is reported,[60] but was rather brought to Italy by refugees from Samos, where the first Sibylline oracles predate the early seventh century.[61] In 531 Samians escaping the tyranny of Polycrates founded Dicaearchia (later Puteoli), and this colony was never entirely independent of Cumae, 10 kilometres distant. In Parke's opinion, the Samians could have introduced Sibylline prophecy to the Cumaeans, and the new Sibyl may have adopted the use of the lots, traditionally employed at Italic oracles,[62] alongside inspired prophecy, characteristic of the Greek Sibyls. Parke further suggests that the Sibylline oracle existed till 421, when Cumae was destroyed by the Campanians,[63] and was restored by Augustus, but relapsed into obsolescence after a century, although the cult of Apollo persisted.[64] It is also assumed that the oracle responded to enquiries and served as 'an official state institution'.[65]

[58] *Immanis in antro bacchatur vates.*

[59] *Aen.* 6. 77–80. Virgil's *Aeneid*, an epic poem, cannot be treated as if it were a documentary report. Book 6 is still quoted by some as a description of an actual oracular practice, while it is in fact a reflection of the author's ideas on the Greek quest for divine wisdom, as Servius pointed out in the 4th cent. AD in his *Introduction*: 'All of Virgil is full of wisdom, but especially this book, of which the great part is taken from Homer. Some things are said simply, many are historical, many from the lofty wisdom of philosophers, theologians, and Egyptians, to the extent that many have written whole treatises about individual aspects of this book' (Laird 2001: 53; cf. Fletcher 1962: pp. ix–xxxi).

[60] Peterson 1919: 56.

[61] Parke 1988: 78–9; Potter 1990: 477. One of the names of the Cumaean Sibyl, Herophile, hints at the association of the prophetess with Hera, the great goddess of Samos, named on a bronze disc from Cumae (Guarducci 1946–8), which presumably served as a lot (Gagé 1955: 45; Parke 1988: 88–9). Hera's prophetic powers are also attested in Perachora near Corinthus (Dunbabin 1951; Payne 1940: 1–19; Will 1953).

[62] Parke 1988: 83.

[63] Diod. 12. 76. 4; Livy 4. 44. 12.

[64] Parke 1988: 81.

[65] Ibid. 93; as well as Gagé 1955: 44; Peterson 1919: 55. G. Vanotti assumes the existence of oracular practices in Cumae, Vanotti 1998.

However, we lack evidence of historical consultations in Cumae. Pausanias already observes that the Cumaeans cannot cite a single oracle of their Sibyl, and have to content themselves with the possession of a stone urn containing her bones.[66] Pseudo-Justin, a Christian author who lived sometime between the third to fifth century, tries to explain the imperfect metre of the Sibyl's pronouncements as resulting from the ignorance of the attendants who copied them,[67] thus alluding to real activities of the oracle. But this evidence is too late, based on the currency of the Sibylline books and on the assumption by the author, who is candid enough to qualify it by saying 'I deemed', *ephaskon*.

The Cumaean Sibyl seems to be a legendary or semi-legendary figure, no more real than other Sibyls.[68] Even if a female seer ever lived in Cumae, and was worshipped later, there are no traces of operation of her oracle, let alone of a state institution focused on her prophecy. Myths associated with the Sibyl were indeed common in Campania, and presumably adopted some of the traits of actual divination practices, but these myths referred to the distant past. The popularity of written predictions ascribed to the Cumaean Sibyl does not necessarily prove the existence of a mantic shrine.

In addition to her vatic talent, Virgil's Sibyl fulfils the role of a guide to the netherworld, a shamanistic function *par excellence*: she knows how to get to Hades and she leads Aeneas there.[69] Virgil patterned this ability of the Cumaean Sibyl, which distinguishes her from other Sibyls, on Hermes and other psychopomps, as part of his strategy to conflate multiple traditions in creating poetic images.[70] If we look for mortal prototypes of the Cumaean Sibyl, it would be in the image of a leader of mystery initiations. Virgil's Sibyl accumulates various kinds of mystical experience known to the Romans.[71]

In antiquity, a cave in Cumae was attributed to the Sibyl. It is mentioned in the *Aeneid*: 'the vast cavern, hidden (abode) of the dreadful Sibyl',[72] located near the seat of Apollo in Cumae. Virgil

[66] Paus. 10. 12. 8. [67] *Cohortatio ad gentiles* 37.

[68] Cf. Perret 1978: 164–5. [69] Champeaux 2004: 48.

[70] Clark 1979: 209–11. Nelis 2004 compares the Sibyl with Medea, Hecate's priestess and witch.

[71] Champeaux 2004: 48. [72] *Aen.* 6. 10–11.

depicts this abode twice in almost the same terms:[73] 'The huge side of the Euboean rock is hewn into a cavern, whither lead a hundred wide mouths, a hundred gateways, whence rush as many voices, the answers of the Sibyl' (translation by H. Rushton Fairclough). Pseudo-Justin gives an account of his visit to the cave:[74]

> We also saw a place in Cumae where we found a large basilica hewn out of a single rock, a magnificent work worthy of all admiration. Those who had inherited ancestral tradition said that the Sibyl used to prophesy there. In the middle of the basilica they showed us three tanks cut out of the same rock. When filled with water they say the Sibyl used to bathe in them. She would then robe and go into the inmost room of the basilica which was also hewn of the face of the rock. . . . The peculiarity of this particular oracle being that the voice of the Sibyl reaches the hearer through a quantity of perforations in the volcanic rock which all communicate with the recess in which she stands.[75]

In the sixth century AD a cavern on the acropolis of Cumae, still known as the cave of the Sibyl, was exploited in an unsuccessful stratagem in the war against the Goths, as described by Agathias, a sixth-century Byzantine historian.[76]

In modern times, several grottoes have been nominated for the role of the Sibyl's abode. The identification of a tunnel running from Avernus to Cumae as the cavern of the Sibyl has already been abandoned.[77] Some consider the cavern in the lower acropolis tunnel to be the Sibyl's grotto.[78] An artificial hypogeum located close to the temple of Apollo has also been suggested.[79] In the 1930s A. Maiuri excavated a cavern hewn into the rock below the gate of the acropolis of Cumae, comprising a 131 m-long and 5 m-high trapezoidal passageway, a central chamber with rock-cut benches, and cisterns at its

[73] *Aen.* 6. 42–4, 77–82; Norden 1916: 133; Fletcher 1962: 50–2.

[74] *Cohortatio ad gentiles* 37–8; Parke 1988: 162.

[75] Page 1894: 445. Procopius in the 6th cent. AD mentions that the local population pointed out a cave in Cimae, where the Sibyl's oracle was located (*History of the Wars* 5. 14. 3).

[76] *Historiae* 1. 10; Norden 1916: 133.

[77] Current till the early 20th cent., Norden 1916: 133; cf. Clark 1977: 486; Austin 1977: 49; Pagano *et al.* 1982: 296–319.

[78] Peterson 1919: 57; Napoli 1965: 105–8.

[79] Pagano 1985/6: 115.

entrance.[80] He dated the main passage to the fifth century, and other features to the fourth to third centuries.[81] Notwithstanding the scepticism voiced by some critics immediately after Maiuri's publication,[82] this grotto is believed by many to be the Sibyl's cave: its general layout matches Pseudo-Justin's description, and its central chamber with nine openings broadly corresponds to Virgil's adyton with a 'hundred mouths', through which the prophetess's many voices reverberate.[83] Maiuri dates its construction to the late sixth–early fifth century, under the Cumaean tyrant Aristodemus.[84] This attribution has been questioned recently. The cavern excavated by Maiuri yielded no ex-votos and can be dated by its architecture only, which definitely postdates the fifth century: the long tunnel was possibly constructed for defensive purposes in the fourth century, while the cisterns and the main chamber cannot be dated earlier than the Imperial period.[85] None of the three grottoes located on the acropolis of Cumae has yielded artefacts attesting to cultic activities. It is however possible that one of them was regarded as the Sibyl's cave in Roman times, and later authors were inspired by this belief.[86] This inference is in line with the absence of written evidence of historical oracular activities associated with the Cumaean Sibyl. Since no real oracular centre existed, no archaeological vestiges could be found. There is a vast difference between being a popular attraction and a source of Virgil's inspiration and being the seat of an actual oracle.

The Cumaean Sibyl is ascribed an important role in Rome. According to legend, an old woman proposed that Tarquinius Superbus, whose reign is dated to the late sixth century, buy nine books for 300 gold pieces, but the king refused.[87] Finally, when six books had been

[80] Maiuri 1958: 123–32; regrettably, no detailed report of this dig has been published. See also Pagano 1985/6.

[81] Maiuri 1958: 124, 132.

[82] Marrou 1934: 33–4.

[83] Latimer 1940: 32–3; Gagé 1955: 43; McKay 1972: 148; Clark 1977: 492; Parke 1988: 80; Potter 1990: 477; Frederiksen 1984: 76; Austin 1977: 49.

[84] Hardie 1969: 16–17, 24; Parke 1988: 86–7; Clark 1977: 493; Frederiksen 1984: 76.

[85] Pagano 1985/6: 107–8; Maddoli 1991: 253; Curnow 2004: 134.

[86] Marrou 1934: 34; Fletcher 1962: 51; Clark 1977: 492; Lavagne 1988: 468–80; Ogden 2001: 71. Even Maiuri 1958: 136 admitted that Virgil may have colligated two caverns poetically in his picture of the Sibyl's crypt.

[87] Dion. Hal. 4. 62; Varro in Lact. *Div. Inst.* 1. 6. 10–11; Aul. Gell. 1. 19; Servius *Ad Aen.* 6. 72.

burnt, he paid that sum for the remaining three. The books, written in Greek, were installed on the Capitol and consulted by order of the state at times of calamity.[88] However, the attribution of the ancient books to the Cumaean Sibyl may ensue from the fame of the Sibylline books in the Greek world, and in particular from the eminence of the Cumaean Sibyl in Magna Graecia.[89] These books are sometimes called the Books of the Fate, *Libri Fatales*. The Sibyl appears to have been a purely legendary figure, and the Roman Sibylline books were probably born out of an amalgamation of Etruscan and Greek traditions.[90]

Thus, in the absence of either historical or archaeological evidence of an actual oracle, the Cumaean Sibyl appears as a forceful mythological personification of a prophetess inspired by Apollo and living in a cave. The association with the cavern is a dominant feature in the Sibyl's mythical personality: the cave-dwelling was first mentioned in the third century BC, and persisted into Imperial times. This association does not necessarily derive from the influence of Italic subterranean oracles.[91] The Greek Erythraean Sibyl was worshipped in a grotto. As shown above, in Greece caves housed both inspirational prophecy and cleromancy, and these two modes of divination, ascribed to the Cumaean Sibyl, coexisted in the Corycian cave and at Delphi. The Greek background was sufficient to create the image of the Cumaean Sibyl as a cavern-dweller. She was envisaged as living in a cave, her cave was shown to tourists—there were plenty of natural and artificial grottoes in the vicinity—yet the Cumaean Sibyl remained a legendary, rather than a historical figure, and her oracle existed only in the poet's imagination.

In summary, the Sibylline tradition emphasizes divine inspiration as the force impelling the prophetesses to reveal their visions. The

[88] Frederiksen 1984: 161; Parke 1988: 31, 34, 77, 137–8; Berneder 2001: 11–37; Champeaux 2004: 43–4; Février 2004.

[89] In the same passage Varro confuses two Roman kings, substituting Tarquinius Priscus for Tarquinius Superbus. For other legends connecting the Sibyl with Rome, see Parke 1988: 74–7; Gagé 1955: 27–38; Guitard 2004.

[90] Bloch 1940, cf. Gagé 1955: 32–4, 52–3, 66–8.

[91] Although the most conspicuous feature of the topography of the sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia at Preneste, the Italian oracle *par excellence,* is a natural cavern, known as *Antro delle Sorti*. In front of the grotto was the temple of Fortuna, a great hall with a rock-cut apse, decorated with stalactites. The hall with the apse looks like an enlarged replica of *Antro delle Sorti,* which was 'the archetype of Fortuna's cultic places' (Champeaux 1982: 7; 1990: 103; Grottanelli 2005: 131–2).

Sibyl was a quintessential seer: even after death she does not cease from prophesying, but her spirit or eternal voice fills the air with portent.[92] The environment required for the Sibyl's activities is therefore very significant, because it reflects the traditional Greek views on the conditions necessary for a clairvoyant.

The evidence on pagan Sibyls is limited, and indications of the scenery for their activities occur only at random. Nevertheless, in several cases, these prophetesses are connected with caves or underground dwellings: Sibyl-like Cassandra was incarcerated in a cave, the Erythraean Sibyl was born and worshipped in a grotto, at Lilybaeum the Sibyl possessed a cave, the Cimmerian Sibyl lived in the subterranean town at Avernus, and the most remarkable and fearsome cave was allotted to the Cumaean Sibyl. Thus, the Greeks seem to have deemed confinement to the darkness of the grotto an essential prerequisite for the divinely inspired revelations of the clairvoyant Sibyls.

2. BLIND SEERS

From times immemorial it has been believed that blindness is often accompanied by superior wisdom, understanding of hidden things, extraordinary memory, and musical talents. This conviction is cross-cultural and, as we will see, is attested to in the Greek, Celtic, and Slav cultures. Stories of blind prophets and poets are numerous and disclose a pattern: divine gifts of prophecy and poetry are intended by the gods to compensate the sightless for the lack of physical vision.[93] In the blind seers and bards, the juxtaposition of their bodily disadvantage and mental advantage represents an important aspect of the effects of partial sensory deprivation on the mind.

Along with frequent blindness, poets and prophets shared, as we have already seen in the Introduction, a common setting within the Greek culture. In fact, for the Greeks, poetry and prophecy spring from the same source.[94] Plato describes inspired poets as seized by

[92] Plut., *Mor.* 398CD; Phlegon *FGH* 257 F37; Eitrem 1945: 114–18; Alexandre 1856: 18–19; Parke 1988: 114–15.

[93] Cf. Delcourt 1982: 124; Buxton 1980: 29.

[94] Chadwick 1942; Guthrie 1962–7: ii. 6; Maurizio 1995: 76–9. Cf. Compton 2006: 171–80 and 253–67 on the Germanic world. See also above, Ch. 2.1 and 2.3.

the Graces or the Muses.[95] Later poets assume the role of *manteis* in their poetry, and Pindar even refers to himself as a prophet of the Muses.[96] Alcaeus, in his *Hymn to Apollo* portrays the god as the patron of music and poetry, who received a lyre from Zeus at his birth, and as a prophet.[97] These attributes are closely associated, especially in mythological or quasi-historical personages, such as Orpheus and Cinyras, who were both singers and seers.[98] Delphic legends ascribed the invention of hexameter either to Olen, the singer of Apolline hymns and the first prophet at Delphi, or to Phemonoe, the first Pythia.[99]

A combination of knowledge of the past and poetic talents was indispensable for the composition of a theogony, and such poems were attributed to a number of the historical and quasi-historical archaic diviners and sages, such as Orpheus, Musaeus, Epimenides, Pherecydes, perhaps also Aristeas and Abaris.[100] The earliest surviving theogony is by Hesiod, and as one should expect, he does not discriminate between the spheres of poetry and prophecy. For Hesiod, the knowledge of past and future was part of his poetic investiture.[101] In his *Theogony* the Muses 'delight the mighty heart of Zeus on Olympus by telling of what is and what shall be and what was before', and the poet inspired by them has to 'celebrate past and future'.[102] The poet therefore is compared to prophets, like Calchas the bird-augur,[103] who were distinguished by their knowledge of the past, present, and future.[104]

Hesiod's Muses dwelling on the Helicon are reminiscent of the Nymphs who live in the wild and capture mortals visiting their realm. Similarly to nympholepts, 'those seized by the Nymphs', who

[95] *Charisin kai Mousais epaptetai:* Plato, *Leg.* 3. 682a; cf. *Ion* 533–536B; Delatte 1934: 7, 57–58, 68; Tigerstedt 1970: 164; Motte 2004: 250–1.

[96] *Pae.* 6. 6, 51–8 Maehler, Dillery 2005: 185.

[97] Fr. 142 Page 1962; Page 1955: 247.

[98] Strabo 7 fr. 18–19; Page 1955: 248; Scheiberg 1979: 22; Compton 2006: 177–9.

[99] Parke 1981: 103; Compton 2006: 173.

[100] Parke 1988: 11; Compton 2006: 171–80; for Epimenides, Aristeas, Abaris, and Pherecydes, see Ch. 4.1.

[101] Murray 1981: 93.

[102] *Theog.* 36–9; cf. the role of the Muses as 'assessors of prophesy' at Delphi (Plut. *Mor.* 402C); Cornford 1952: 77.

[103] Hom. *Il.* 1. 70.

[104] Chadwick 1942: 2–3; Morrison 1981: 93; Havelock 1963: 105.

are prone to prophesy, Hesiod is chosen by the Muses to sing his poetry: both prophetic nympholepts and poets obtain their knowledge, hidden from other mortals, from divine maidens who summon them.[105]

Greek writers are quite explicit about the divine nature of poetry. Democritus says: 'Everything a poet does with enthusiasm and divine *pneuma*, is very good',[106] whereas for Plato 'the poetry of the sane man vanishes into nothingness before that of the inspired madmen'.[107] Socrates, discussing the three kinds of greatest blessings which come to men through divine madness (*mania*), names prophetic, telestic (initiatory), and poetic madness.[108]

Prophets

Herodotus relates the story of Evenius,[109] the (alleged) father of Deiphonus, the prophet who accompanied the Greeks at Mycale, as an episode from the recent past. Yet this anecdote attests to the Greek stereotype of the divine introduction to prophecy rather than to a real biographical event.

Evenius, an aristocrat from Apollonia on the Ionian Gulf, was entrusted by his townsmen with the watch of a flock sacred to Helios. The shepherd and the sheep passed nights in a cave (*antron*). One night Evenius fell asleep, and some sheep were killed by wolves. Evenius did not succeed in concealing his fault, and a court condemned him to be blinded. Immediately after this punishment, the land became barren. When consulted, both Delphi and Dodona told the people of Apollonia that their disaster was the divine vengeance for the mistreatment of Evenius, whose mistake had been caused by the gods' will, and that the Apollonians should make any restitution Evenius asked for. The gods also promised that they would give him

[105] Snell 1960: 138; on the nympholepts see Ch. 2.1.

[106] *DK* fr. B18; Delatte 1934: 28–79; Smith 1965: 420; Tigerstedt 1970: 163. This is the most ancient occurrence of the word *enthousiasmos* in the extant literature, Delatte 1934: 33.

[107] *Phaedr.* 245A; Linforth 1946; Cornford 1952: 66; see Murray 1981 for the controversy on the applicability of Plato's remarks to pre-Platonic views of poetry.

[108] *Phaedr.* 244; Linforth 1946.

[109] 9. 93–5.

such a gift that people would deem him happy. Although not without some cheating, the townspeople requited Evenius. On that same day the gods fulfilled their vow, and 'he had a natural gift of prophecy'.[110]

The tale of Evenius depicts a 'paradoxical initiation of a mantis': although of noble birth, Evenius is a simple-minded man, unable either to refute the charge of wrongdoing or to exploit fully the potential of the restitution ordered by the gods.[111] Notwithstanding his lack of sophistication, Evenius is chosen by the gods as their instrument: they send the wolves which ultimately cause his blindness, and they bestow on him the mantic gift. The story is constructed of standard elements, current in tales of other seers. It is therefore significant that the prophetic initiation of Evenius begins with his sleep in a cave and continues with his blindness. The experience in the cave launched Evenius' career as a *mantis*;[112] his subsequent blindness was a mark of his new status, an obvious symbol of prophetic vocation.

Many important prophets were blind. The biography of Tiresias, the paradigm prophet, includes being son to a Nymph, and blindness: blinded by a goddess, either Athena or Hera, he was endowed with the gift of clairvoyance to compensate for this deficiency.[113] The insight of blind Tiresias is not only greater than that of other mortals—it is almost divine, 'most like that of Apollo'.[114] Of other sightless seers, the Thracian Phineus was blinded as an adult,[115] whereas the Messenian Ophioneus was born blind.[116] The Romans shared with the Greeks the idea that blindness was conducive to wisdom: in his portrait of Tiresias, Statius refers to the seer's 'perspicacious darkness'.[117]

Blindness of prophets emphasizes their constant state of visual deprivation. The seer exercises his inner prophetic vision, at the

[110] *Emphuton mantikên eiche.*

[111] Grottanelli 1994–5: 95; 2003. Burkert 1997 discusses other aspects of the story.

[112] Similar to Epimenides' sleep in a cave, below, Ch. 4.1.

[113] Hes., fr. 162 Merkelbach-West; Apollod. 3. 6. 7; Phlegon, *FGH* 257 F36; Hygin. *Fab.* 75; Halliday 1913: 78.

[114] Soph. *Oed. Tyr.* 284–5; Buxton 1980: 23–4.

[115] Apollod. 1. 9. 21; Apoll. Rhod. 2. 178; Istrus, *FGH* 334 F67. For the analysis of other sources see Bouvier and Moreau 1983: 5; Grégoire 1949: 79–85.

[116] Paus. 4. 10. 6.

[117] *Theb.* 4. 407.

expense of being deprived of the normal sight which other mortals enjoy. The case of Phormio of Erythae[118] is especially telling: a common fisherman, he became blind through disease, handed down to his fellow citizens precious advice he saw as a vision in a dream, and subsequently recovered his sight, as if his temporary blindness was intended to enable him to prophesy.

In pagan Ireland, blindness was quite common among the Druids, who were priests, prophets, sorcerers, and bards. Druidic sightlessness was regarded as supernatural reinforcement of clairvoyance, a gift bestowed on exceptional individuals worthy of direct contact with the divine. Notwithstanding the requirement of sacerdotal physical integrity, blindness, sometimes resulting from self-mutilation, was considered a part of the Druidic initiation. Most symbolic is the story of a Druid named Dallan Forgaill, who died immediately after his recovery of sight: for a clairvoyant, regaining physical vision meant the loss of inner vision, disqualification, and spiritual death, logically followed by bodily demise.[119]

Poets

Predictably, some outstanding poets were also blind. Intense inner concentration was deemed essential for the inspiration of poets no less than for prophets. The solitude required by seers and bards for concentration could be produced artificially, by closing the eyes or covering the head.[120] A person deprived of sight found himself in eternal darkness, which was even deeper than the temporary darkness of a cave.

Sightlessness of many famous poets did not escape the attention of the Greeks: in the first century AD Dio Chrysostom made one of his characters observe that all the great poets were blind, and there was no way to become a poet otherwise.[121] Homer was described as a blind bard at least by the time of Thucydides.[122] The poet's Hellenistic biography interprets his blindness as the gift of the Muses: praying

[118] Paus. 7. 5. 7. [119] Le Roux and Guyonvarc'h 1986: 147–50.
[120] Chadwick 1942: 59.
[121] *Or.* 36. 10–11; Buxton 1980: 27. [122] Thuc. 3. 104. 5; Compton 2006: 69.

at the tomb of Achilles, Homer was blinded by a sight of a warrior in magnificent armour, and in compensation Thetis and the Muses granted him poetic talent.[123]

Introducing Demodocus the ideal bard, Homer says: 'The Muse loved him greatly and gave him a blessing and a curse. She took away his eyes, but gave him the gift of sweet song.'[124] Also blind was the author of the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*.[125] Thamyris, who was credited with a *Theogony* and other poems, was purportedly blinded by the Muses.[126]

Some later poets were sightless as well. The Locrian poet Xenocritus is reported to have been born blind.[127] Stesichorus lost his sight for writing abuse of Helen, but regained it on writing his recantation, persuaded either by a dream or by a messenger from Helen.[128] Either version of Stesichorus' story is a combination of two traditional motifs, the blindness of a poet and his poetry inspired by supernatural agents.[129] Achaeus, an Athenian dramatist and a contemporary of Sophocles, is said to have lost his sight when he was stung by bees.[130] As we have already seen, honey and honeycombs were symbolic of poetic vocation, and outstanding poets attracted bees.[131] The same logic which gave rise to the anecdotes of poets in whose mouths bees built their honeycombs suggested that they distinguished Achaeus by making him blind, like many of his great predecessors.

Being blind, Homer obviously did not need sojourns in caves in order to avoid being distracted by the views of the mundane world, but the idea persisted that a great poet attains divine inspiration preferably in isolation. The people of Smyrna proudly showed a grotto where Homer composed his poems; they also erected a shrine for him, known as Homereum.[132] There are natural caves and ancient artificial grottoes in the vicinity of Smyrna,[133] but the

[123] *Vita Hom.* 6. 252; Compton 2006: 70.
[124] *Od.* 8. 63–4.
[125] *H. Ap.* 172.
[126] Hom. *Il.* 2. 594; Suda, s.v. *Thamuris*; Apollod. 1. 3. 3; Paus. 4. 33. 3; Diod. Sic. 3. 67.
[127] Wickert 1967.
[128] Suda, s.v. Stesichorus; Paus. 3. 19. 13–20. 1.
[129] Compton 2006: 90; Burkert 1972: 153.
[130] Test. 3a–b, Kannicht-Snell i. 20.
[131] Above, Ch. 2.1.
[132] Paus. 7. 5. 12; Adam 1963.
[133] Frazer 1898: comm. to Paus. 7. 5. 12.

important point is not whether Homer was really born in Smyrna or worked in a specific cave, but the connection between the creative activity of the great poet and a cave.

Euripides possessed a cave, as well. A reliable fourth-century BC source gives an account of Euripides' withdrawals to a grim and gloomy cavern on the isle of Salamis, where the dramatist wrote his plays.[134] Satyrus, the second-century BC author of Euripides' biography,[135] and Aulus Gellius[136] in the second century AD were familiar with the tradition ascribing to Euripides ownership of a large cave with its mouth open to the sea, where he spent days alone in contemplation or writing, despising everything that was not great and lofty; Aulus Gellius even visited this 'grim and gloomy cavern'. Euripides' refuge has probably been identified: a cave recently excavated on Salamis yielded a vase inscribed with the poet's name.[137]

The *Life* of Euripides[138] explains that the poet withdrew to his cave in order to avoid the public. In the case of Euripides, this explanation may be correct: solitude is required for poetic inspiration. However, the idea that poets must spend a long time alone in isolated places seems to be part of the conventional portrait of a poet, hence the attribution of a cave to Homer.[139] Moreover, the blindness of poets indicates that temporary isolation from the world of perception was deemed insufficient, and to become a perfect incarnation of the idea of poetic inspiration one had to be deprived of sight, the leading channel of perception in humans.

It was common knowledge that absence of distraction was conducive to concentration. A rumour said that the philosopher Democritus deliberately destroyed his sight in order that his senses might be blocked up and allow his mind remain undisturbed. Plutarch, who believed that the story was false, was nevertheless absolutely

[134] Philoch. *FGH* 328 F219; cf. Murray 1965: 10.

[135] Hunt 1912: 9, no. 1176, fr. 39. ix.

[136] 15. 20. 5.

[137] Lolos 1997.

[138] Méridier 1925: 63, cf. 79. Lefkowitz 1981 suggests that, by means of his attribution of a cave to Euripides, the author of the *Life* explains the poet's notorious misanthropy and his beautiful descriptions of the sea.

[139] Many centuries later, the famous translator of Homer into English, Alexander Pope, enjoyed the elation of contemplation and poetic inspiration in his 'pensive Grott', Bonnechere 2001: 45–50.

convinced that 'those who make most use of their intellect make least use of their senses'.[140]

It is noteworthy that blind bards were quite common in modern times. Among the South Slav epic singers, thoroughly investigated at the beginning of the twentieth century, many were blind.[141] Many Russian bards were sightless, and among the Sundanese of western Java, blind bards were more usual than seeing individuals.[142] We also find a number of sightless poets in Ireland.[143]

In Chapter 1 I discussed the fact that blindness, or even restriction of visual perception, can produce significant effects on the mind: hallucinations and other forms of 'inner vision' are reported in many modern patients. Such effects must have been discernible in the past, accounting for the fact that many blind people acquired reputations as clairvoyants. The perpetual darkness of the blindness enhanced the talents of poets and contributed to their fame. Accordingly, sightlessness was believed to be the reason for the individual's sensitivity to supernatural forces. In reality, in a permanent state of visual deprivation the mind can generate its own images. We would define this ability as a tendency to hallucinations and visions. The Greeks believed that the gods deprived an individual of his sight and compensated him with the gift of vatic or poetic inspiration.[144] They also knew that blindness was associated with the better concentration indispensable for poetic activities.

Myths and quasi-historical narratives frequently portray freelance 'impresarios of the gods', seers and poets, as either cave-dwellers or blind or even both. The sheer number of such stories is too substantial to be accidental. The insistence of the tradition on sensory deprivation experienced by these individuals is based in age-long observation of prophets and bards, which gave rise to their conventional image. So many of them lived in isolated places, and encountered the divine in autistic mystical states, remote from the human society, that the conventional biographies reflected these peculiarities. Legends about mythological seers and poets from the distant past placed them in caves; when depicting more recent events, storytellers

[140] Plut. *Mor.* 521D.
[141] Fränkel 1975: 22; Compton 2006: 70.
[142] Bowra 1952: 421.
[143] Compton 2006: 207.
[144] Deonna 1965: 205–7.

limited themselves to ascribing to these figures blindness or prolonged stays in caves rather than permanent residence there. In either case, the tradition discloses a fundamental feature of paradigm prophets and poets singled out by generations of observers. The frequent cases of immersion in the outer darkness of a grotto or in the inner darkness of blindness indicate that inspired visions and revelations came to Greek seers and poets from the undistracted flow of imagination within their own mind, rather than from the outside world.

4

Sages and Philosophers

The dawn of the Greek love of wisdom, which was later known as philosophy,[1] began as the quest of the ultimate truth by the early sages. This truth, as shown in the Introduction, could not be discovered by mundane human means: being superhuman, it could only be revealed by the gods to those whom they favoured. To attain divine revelation, a mortal had to liberate his soul from the limitations of the world and the grip of everyday thoughts on his mind, or in modern words, to reach altered state of consciousness. Fortunately, the fragmented evidence on the activities of semi-legendary and historical sages, and later thinkers usually classified as philosophers, provides some clues to their way of life and search for wisdom. In this scanty data, caves and catabasis appear with remarkable consistency.

Many tend to belittle the importance of revelation in the activities of ancient thinkers on the simple ground that their doctrines contained brilliant insights and were formulated in discursive form. Mystic apparitions seem to be incongruous with rational discourse. Socrates' trances described by Alcibiades are generally regarded as 'the irrational' side of the otherwise quite rational thinker.[2] Among modern philosophers and scientists, more than a few arrived at their seminal ideas in dreams or trance-like reverie.[3] The life of René Descartes, considered the founder of modern philosophy, provides a good example: many of his fundamental ideas emerged first in his dreams, and only later were rendered in distinct logical form.[4]

[1] The Pythagoreans seem to be the first to call themselves 'lovers of wisdom' (Cornford 1952: 115).

[2] Plato, Sym. 174A, 220C; Guthrie 1962–7: iii. 402–5; Nieto 1997: 39.

[3] Martindale 1981: 370.

[4] Cottingham 1998.

S. Ramanujan, a mathematical genius born in India in the late nineteenth century and later active in Cambridge, explained that 'the fully formed equations were whispered to him in dreams' by the presiding goddess of his native village.[5] O. Loewi, awarded the Nobel Prize for his new concept of brain activity, was struck by the revolutionary idea of chemical transmission while sleeping.[6] D. I. Mendeleyev, the prominent Russian chemist who formulated in 1869 the periodic classification of the elements, first saw his famous table in a dream.[7] Another chemist, A. Kekulé, devised a structural formula for the benzene molecule when he was dozing in front of a fireplace.[8] C. G. Hempel argues that, even in modern science, a hypothesis may be freely invented and can come from most unexpected sources, including mystic inspiration; scientific objectivity is safeguarded by subsequent scrutiny of the proposed ideas.[9] Thus, rational argumentation and the final coherent form of the doctrines of Greek philosophers do not imply that the origin of the proposed tenets was in purely logical deliberation.

1. EARLY SAGES

Epimenides

Epimenides of Crete, one of the canonical Seven Sages, was famous as an exorcist, a prophet, and a poet. The story of how he purged Attica of the blood-guilt inflicted on the country by the killing of Cylon's supporters is recounted by several authors and dated to the 44th or the 46th Olympiad, that is, either to 604–601 or to 596–593.[10] The date and circumstances of Epimenides' purification may be a later

[5] Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998: 195.

[6] Mazzarello 2000.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Hempel 1966: 16.

[9] Ibid. 3–18.

[10] Arist. *Athen. Pol.* 1; Diog. Laert 1. 109 (Theopomp. *FGH* 115 F67), Suda, s.v. *Epimenidês,* Plut. *Solon* 12; Plato *Leg.* 1. 642 D 4; Paus. 1. 14. 4; cf. Diels 1891; Demoulin 1901; Willetts 1962: 311; Burkert 1972: 103; Leclerc 1992; Ogden 2001: 119; Dillery 2005: 181; Compton 2006: 174–7.

elaboration, but the fetching of a purifier from Crete, famous for its expertise in rituals, seems to be an authentic fact.[11] Epimenides was also credited with truthful predictions concerning the future of Athens and Sparta, and with the authorship of several epic poems, among them *Theogony*, *Mysteries*, and *Purifications*.[12]

His reputation as a seer, *mantis*, and expert in divinely inspired and hidden wisdom[13] was enhanced by many extraordinary details of his biography. The most intriguing episode is his years-long sleep in a cave: Epimenides was said to have fallen asleep in a cave for forty to sixty years. This story was current as early as the sixth century.[14]

When he finally awoke from his sleep in the cave, Epimenides gained the reputation of a man 'most beloved by the gods'.[15] Maximus of Tyre explains the nature of his experience: Epimenides claimed that his teacher in the divine arts was 'a long sleep with dreams' and that during this sleep in the cave of the Dictaean Zeus he talked to the gods, listened to their conversations, and met Truth (*Alêtheia*) and Justice (*Dikê*).[16] Thus, Epimenides attained his superhuman wisdom while sleeping in a cave.

In the early sources, the location of the cave remains unclear; later traditions identify it with the famous Cretan caverns, the Idaean[17] or the Dictaean.[18] Epimenides was not the first Cretan who attained divine wisdom in a cavern. In Plato's time a Cretan cave was already revered as the place where Minos descended to meet his father Zeus

[11] Burkert 1972: 151; Parke 1988: 174. On the Archaic figure of *iêtêr kakôn*, diviner, healer, and purifier, see Halliday 1913: 59–65.

[12] Diog. Laert. 1. 112, 114; Plato *Leg*. 1. 642 D 4; Suda, s.v. *Epimenidês*; Rohde 1925: 332–3; Svenbro 1993: 136. West 1983: 49 suggests that these poems were most probably composed at a later date, and attributed to the semi-legendary diviner.

[13] *Enthousiastikê kai telestikê sophia*, Plut. *Solon* 12.

[14] And known to Xenophanes (*DK* 21 A1); Diog. Laert. 1. 109 (Theopomp. *FGH* 115 F67); Paus. 1. 14. 4; Plut. *Mor*. 784A; Plin. *Hist. Nat*. 7. 175. It is tempting to compare the story of Epimenides' long sleep to the legend of the Seven Sleeping Youths of Ephesus, known in about a dozen versions all over the Mediterranean: seven young Christians hid in a cave during Decius' persecutions (AD 249–51), fell asleep, and awoke after several hundred years (Roux 1999: 331–2).

[15] Diog. Laert. 1. 109.

[16] Max. Tyr. *Diss*. 10. 1; 38. 3; Demoulin 1901: 98; Rohde 1925: 96; Halliday 1913: 91; Willetts 1962: 216; Burkert 1969: 16; Ogden 2001: 120.

[17] Diog. Laert. 7. 3.

[18] Max. Tyr. *Diss*. 10. 1.

and to receive his laws.[19] Thus, for the Cretans the cave was a place where immediate contact between a mortal and a god and the mortal's illumination as a result of this meeting could be expected.

Zeus was said to have been born in a cave on Mt Dicte and brought up by the Nymphs in the Idaean cave.[20] A cave, more than 50 m deep, has been identified as the Idaean cave of Classical times; it rendered numerous votive objects, notably bronze shields, cauldrons, and cymbals,[21] associated with the armed dances of the Couretes. Although the Dictaean cave has not yet been convincingly identified, the cult of Zeus Dictaeus is attested to by several inscriptions from eastern Crete.[22] The Idaean and the Dictaean caves are well-known as places of initiatory ceremonies.[23]

Only a few further particulars of Epimenides' semi-mythical biography are known, but each detail is enlightening. His intimate connection with the Nymphs is emphasized in several tales. Either he was the son of a Nymph, Balte,[24] or obtained his magic nourishment from the Nymphs.[25] This supernatural food separated Epimenides from the rest of humanity: nobody ever saw him eating or relieving himself.[26] Epimenides is further said to have tried to found a sanctuary of the

[19] Plato *Leg.* 1. 624B; Strabo 10. 4. 8 (Ephor. *FGH* 70 F147); Dion. Hal. 2. 61. 2; Diod. 5. 78. 3; [Plato] *Minos* 319E; Hom. *Od.* 19. 178; Maximus of Tyre (*Diss.* 38. 2) indicates the Idaean cave as the meeting-place of Zeus and Minos, Rohde 1925: 96, 108; Robertson 1996: 251.

[20] Dictaean cave: Apollod. 1. 1. 6; Athen. 375 F; Diod. 5. 70; Rohde 1925: 108; Cook 1914–40: ii. 928; Willetts 1962: 216; Faure 1964: 94–9. For the cult of Zeus Dictaeus, see Cook 1914–40: ii. 927–32. Idaean cave: Diod. 5. 70; Cook 1914–40: ii. 932; Faure 1964: 99–100; 110; Prent 2005: 592–4; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 320. Cf. the prophetic cave of Night where Zeus was born and learnt his fate in the Orphic rhapsodies, West 1983: 124.

[21] Cook 1914–40: ii. 938; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 261; Willetts 1962: 143–4, 239–42; Faure 1964: 100–15; Sakellarakis 1988; Prent 2005: 565–76, 591.

[22] Cook 1914–40: ii. 929–30; Faure 1964: 111; Willetts 1962: 215–16.

[23] Rohde 1925: 96; Carcopino 1944: 213; Burkert 1972: 151; Clark 1979: 140; cf. Robertson 1996: 252; see also below, Ch. 5.2. The Idaean cave may have also housed oracular activities, symbolized by recurrent depictions of the tripod on coins of the small city of Axos, which presumably controlled the territory around the cave (Capdeville 1990). Against this conjecture: Prent 2005: 568.

[24] Plut. *Solon* 12.

[25] A mortal seized by a Dictaean Nymph became 'sacred', *hieros,* as an epigram by Callimachus states (*Anth. Pal.* 7. 518; Connor 1988: 165). On nympholepts see Ch. 2.1.

[26] Diog. Laert. 1. 114 (Timaios, *FGH* 566 F4); cf. Rohde 1925: 331; Burkert 1972: 151; Dodds 1973: 142.

Nymphs, but was stopped by a voice from heaven instructing him to consecrate the shrine to Zeus.[27]

Epimenides is said to have often pretended to (die and) be reborn,[28] which is perhaps an attempt to describe the ability of his soul to go out of his body and return whenever he wished.[29] In any case, the idea of multiple reincarnations is reminiscent of Pythagoras' doctrine of metempsychosis,[30] and the two figures share several other important features. Epimenides' skin, discovered long after his death, was covered with peculiar signs, hence the proverb 'Epimenides' skin', meaning 'mysterious things'.[31] The skins of Pythagoras[32] and Zalmoxis[33] were also tattooed. In the opinion of the Greeks, tattooing was ugly and degrading; they also knew that this practice was current among the barbarians of the North, Thracians, Sarmatians, and Dacians. This would explain Zalmoxis' tattoos, but Epimenides' and Pythagoras' tattoo-marks were perhaps signs of dedication to a deity.[34]

On Crete Epimenides was said to be worshipped as a god and be denoted a Couretes. Epimenides himself supposedly maintained that he was Aeacus, the most pious of all the Greeks, the son of Zeus by the Nymph Aegina. Aeacus in his lifetime was the arbitrator in disputes among gods and after his death became the judge of the dead, which implies that Epimenides also claimed the honour of superhuman justice.[35] Finally, Epimenides' longevity, either about 150 or 290 years,[36] is reminiscent of the immeasurably long life of the Sibyl.

[27] Diog. Laert. 1. 114 (Theopomp. *FGH* 115 F69).

[28] *Prospoiêsthênai te pollakis anabebiôkenai*, Diog. Laert. 1. 114.

[29] Suda, s.v. *Epimenidês*. Suda's wording suggests association with Aristeas, whose out-of-body experiences are recorded by Her. 4. 14–15 (cf. Bolton 1962), or Hermotimus of Clazomenae, whose soul left his body and returned at his will, Apollon. *Hist. mirab.* 1. 3, Plin. *Hist. Nat.* 7. 174 (Rohde 1925: 331). It is noteworthy that Hermotimus is named among the earlier incarnations of Pythagoras (Diog. Laert. 8. 5).

[30] Diels 1891: 396 regards Epimenides' rebirths as 'Pythagorean fabrication', whereas Burkert 1972: 151 observes 'parallel development from common origins'.

[31] Suda, s.v. *Epimenidês*.

[32] Schol. in Lucian p. 124 Rabe: 'Pythagoras was also said to have had a tattoo depicting Phoebos on his right thigh.'

[33] Porph. *Vita Pyth.*15.

[34] Dodds 1973: 163; Burkert 1972: 160; cf. Svenbro 1993: 138–42.

[35] Diog. Laert. 1. 114; Plut. *Solon* 12. Aeacus: Plato *Gorg.* 524A, 526E; Pind. *Isthm.* 8. 26; Harrison 1928: 26–7, 52; Dodds 1959: 374; Prent 2005: 599.

[36] Diog. Laert. 1. 112; Suda, s.v. *Epimenidês*.

Epimenides shares some key features with several archaic semi-legendary personages, *maîtres de vérité* whose road to divine truth led through various mystical states.[37] Later tradition ascribed to all of them as a group sojourns in hidden places, implying that super-human feats were commonly associated with prolonged seclusion.[38] The accomplishments of these miracle-workers were indeed extraordinary. Aithalides was said to have been gifted by Hermes so that his soul could travel above the earth or below it, in Hades.[39] Abaris, a Hyperborean holy man who did not require earthly food as sustenance, wandered all over the earth, *entheos*, that is, possessed by the god, Apollo's arrow in his hand, curing sicknesses and purifying pestilence by means of spells and magic, and predicting earthquakes.[40] Hermotimus of Clazomenae was capable of experiencing out-of-body states at will; returning to his body after long journeys, his soul would bring knowledge of the future and other mantic gifts.[41]

[37] Clearch. fr. 8 Wehrli; Clem. *Stromat.* 1. 21. 133; Apollon. *Hist. mirab.* 1. 1–6; Detienne 1963: 69–85; Detienne 1996; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 616–20; Pollard 1965: 106–16; Bonnechere 2003: 118–25.

[38] Greg. Nazianz. *Or.* 4. 59: 'Such was the childishness of their Empedocleis and Aristaii and some Empedotimi and Trophonii and a host of similar miserable people... [They] hid themselves in some adyta, because of the same disease and egocentricity, and when it was found out, received less profit from their dishonesty than contempt from the disclosure.' Notwithstanding the theologian's anti-pagan pathos, this remark appears to reflect the popular tradition well-known to his audience. Nine hundred years earlier, Sophocles' Orestes talks of wise men that were considered dead by false report and, when they returned home, enjoyed great respect (*El.* 62–4). The dramatist and the theologian refer to the same phenomenon of demise and consequent reappearance, known to the wide public, on the one hand, from the accounts of *deuteropotmoi* (below, Ch. 5.1), and on the other hand, from the catabasis stories attributed to Zalmoxis (above, Ch. 2.3) and Pythagoras (below, Ch. 4.2). Cf. Bolton 1962: 123, 144–5.

[39] Pherecydes, *DK* 7 B 8.

[40] Abaris' legend was known in the 5th cent. to Pindar (Harpocr., s.v. *Abaris*) and to Herodotus (4. 36); cf. Plato, *Charm.* 158CD; Iamb. *Vita Pyth.* 91, 136, 141, Porph. *Vita Pyth.* 29; Rohde 1925: 300, 328; Corssen 1912; Baudy 1996.

[41] Apollon. *Hist. mirab.* 1. 3; Plin. *Hist. Nat.* 7. 174; Lucian. *Musc. Laud.* 7; Plut. *Mor.* 592C (Hermotimus' name misspelt 'Hermodorus'; Tertul. *De anima* 44; Rohde 1925: 300, 331). Bremmer regards Hermotimus' story as a late invention (Bremmer 2002: 39). Empedotimus, a figure invented by Heracleides (Wehrli fr. 90), is a fictitious hybrid of Empedocles and Hermotimus; cf. Bidez 1945: 52–9; Bolton 1962: 151–3.

Aristeas of Proconnesus, seized by Apollo (*phoibolamptos*), was seen simultaneously in different places, his soul reaching the most remote countries. The *Arimaspeia*, a poem recording these voyages, is attributed to him. All these events are dated to the time of Croesus and Cyrus. According to his legendary biography, 240 years after his first appearance to the world, Aristeas arrived in Metapontum in Italy in the form of a raven, together with Apollo, and the Metapontines set up Aristeas' bronze statue in the market-place.[42] Aristeas and Abaris are considered by many scholars following K. Meuli to have been shamanistic figures.[43] Recently S. West has convincingly demonstrated that the elements interpreted as shamanistic 'derive from ancient Greek poetic tradition itself based on preliterate forms of narrative in the development of which shamanistic performances may well have been of primary importance'.[44] Shamanism is an etic phenomenon, and the application of the term to the Archaic Greek miracle-workers makes possible the understanding of their soul-travelling and many other feats.[45]

Epimenides' perpetual fasting resembles that of Abaris. During the wanderings of Hermotimus' soul, his body remained motionless at home, and these long periods of cataleptic sleep may be compared to Epimenides' decades-long slumber; both Hermotimus' and Epimenides' souls are reported to have left their bodies and returned at will. In their ecstatic experience, Abaris, Hermotimus, and Epimenides gained secret knowledge and acquired mantic and magic abilities. Aristeas, like Epimenides, was blessed with an extraordinary long life. Both were credited with meetings with Pythagoras,[46] which

[42] Her. 4. 13–15; Athen. 13. 605C; Suda, s.v. *Aristeas*, Max. Tyr. *Diss.* 10. 2, 38. 3; Plin. *Hist. Nat.* 7. 174; 'Testimonia' in Bolton 1962: 206–14; Rohde 1925: 300, 328–9; Corssen 1912: 44; Meuli 1935: 153; Pollard 1965: 109; Burkert 1972: 143; Eliade 1970: 36; Bremmer 1983: 25–38; Ivantchik 1993; Selser 1996; West 2004. For a rationalizing interpretation of Aristeas' experience, see Bolton 1962: 133, 141, with Burkert's criticism (Burkert 1963). In the 1st cent. AD Lucan (1. 676–95) spoke of a Roman matron who flew over the earth 'possessed by Apollo', while her body strolled in the streets (Culianu 1983: 37).

[43] Meuli 1935; Pollard 1965: 109; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 617–18; Dodds 1973: 141; Ginzburg 1991: 209; Kingsley 1994: 190; Baudy 1996; Selser 1996. For an opposite view see Bremmer 1983: 24–35; 2002: 27–40; Dowden 1979, 1980.

[44] West 2004: 61.

[45] See above, Ch. 1.5.

[46] Iamb. *Vita Pyth.* 91–3, 147, 215.

were probably invented but, like the connections between Pythagoras and Zalmoxis, this may reflect the belief that these personalities were compatible: it is hardly coincidental that all three had tattoo-marks. To a certain extent, Epimenides' biography may have been modelled on purely mythological figures, such as Aristaeus:[47] Epimenides and Aristaeus have in common the ambrosia diet supplied by the Nymphs, long stays in caves, vatic talents, and the ability to purify.

The life story of Epimenides contains numerous fantastic episodes, but remains nevertheless the biography of a historic personage.[48] This is a biography of an archaic seer, exorcist, and purifier, who practised ecstatic techniques of catalepsy and catabasis, and perhaps combined them. Epimenides appears to have been an extremely gifted mystic who enhanced his ecstatic states by fasting and other means. It seems that the pre-eminence of caves in the Cretan cults inspired local thinking on the techniques to be employed for attainment of divine enlightenment. Although Epimenides' prolonged cave-sleep seems to have been an elaboration of a traditional rite, he won renown due to his personal talents and feats, even if these were embellished in the legend. Many people descended into Zeus' cave, but only Epimenides returned enlightened with divine knowledge and blessed with super-human powers.

Pherecydes

Pherecydes of Syros,[49] who was active in the sixth century, was credited with the honour of being Pythagoras' teacher.[50] He wrote the earliest Greek prose treatise, which was entitled, according to

[47] On Aristaeus see above, Ch. 2.3.

[48] Parke 1988: 174; cf. Demoulin 1901: 136–7; Dodds 1973: 141–6; West 1983: 45.

[49] On Pherecydes' life and work, see Schibli 1990.

[50] Diog. Laert. 1. 118; Diod. 10. 3. 4; Tertul. *De anima* 28; Iambl. *De vita Pyth.* 10; Suda, s.v. *Pherekudês*. Miracles and prophecies attributed to Pherecydes are similar to those attributed to Pythagoras, therefore it is alleged that they belong properly to the more famous disciple; the opposite approach is that the relationship between the two was invented because of their similar personalities and feats (Kirk *et al.* 1983: 52; Schibli 1990: 6).

later authors, *Five Recesses* (*Pentemukhos*), *Theokrasia,* or *Theogony.*[51] One of the few surviving fragments of Pherecydes[52] deals with recesses and similar features: 'when Pherecydes, the man of Syros, talks of recesses (*muchoi*) and pits (*bothroi*) and caves (*antra*) and doors and gates, and through these speaks in riddles of the creations and disappearances of souls'. This enigmatic phrase testifies that subterranean cavities played a significant role in Pherecydes' book, and he may have envisaged them as passages between this world and the netherworld, used by reincarnated souls.[53] Did he believe that his own soul passed through such ducts? The possibility that Pherecydes himself engaged in ecstatic practices is intimated by report of his interest in the out-of-body experiences of Aithalides whose soul travelled to and from Hades.[54]

Pentemukhos, Damascius says, equals *pentekosmos*—five universes.[55] The word *theokrasia* is rare and late, occurring only in Neoplatonist writings and meaning either 'uniting oneself with god' or 'merging of two gods'.[56] M. West suggests that *pentemukhos theokrasia* 'in relation to Pherecydes would refer to the formation of gods from fire, wind, and water distributed in five nooks';[57] H. Schibli argues that the five nooks are structural principles designating receptacles for the basic material of the universe, and therefore places of birth of the first generation of gods, Ouranos, Tartaros, Chaos, Aer, and Night.[58] Yet a different assumption may be broached: could *pentemukhos theokrasia* be the phrase that later philosophers considered an appropriate description of Pherecydes' visions, the nooks being mental pictures of emerging universes? Some other early Greek thinkers appear to have attained vortex-like ecstatic visions of the primeval world.[59] At any rate, images of nooks and

[51] Or *Seven Recesses—Heptamuchos*, Suda, s.v. *Pherekudês, DK* 7 A2 cf. Damascius, *De principiis* 124b, *DK* A8; West 1971: 8; Schibli 1990: 14–49. It is suggested also that the cryptic title reflects Pherecydes' borrowings from the Babylonian mythology, picturing the world of the dead as divided into seven regions (Kirk *et al.* 1983: 59).

[52] Porphyr. *De antro* 31; *DK* 7 B6.

[53] West 1971: 25; Schibli 1990: 117–21.

[54] *DK* 7 B8.

[55] *DK* 7 A8.

[56] West 1971: viii. 12–15.

[57] Ibid. viii. 36–40.

[58] Schibli 1990: 25–6, 38–49.

[59] Parmenides and Empedocles, discussed below, Ch. 4.3–4.

other cavities, cited several times in the scant preserved fragments, must have played an essential role in Pherecydes' book.

2. PYTHAGORAS

The controversy as to whether Pythagoras was a natural philosopher and mathematician, or a founder of a sect and expert on the fate of the soul after death, or both, still continues.[60] It is noteworthy that the early tradition, including Plato and Aristotle, hardly mentions Pythagoras' own achievements in natural philosophy, but rather pictures him as a charismatic teacher who formulated a new way of life for himself and his followers.[61] The teacher's life was the ultimate proof of the truth of his tenets.[62] If so, Pythagoras' deeds and his particular way of attaining the superhuman knowledge are especially significant.

Pythagoras was born on Samos about 570, and left it for Italy, most probably in the 530s. He may have visited foreign countries, perhaps Egypt, and later lived in Italy, in the Greek colonies Croton and Metapontum, where he died *c.*480.[63] His writings did not survive—to the extent that they ever existed, since the great master supposedly deliberately refrained from writing.[64] In any case, the only way to form an idea of Pythagoras' teaching is by interpreting assorted later sources, which are more often than not controversial and ambiguous.

Like Epimenides, Pythagoras and his followers emphasized his superhuman traits. This tendency was already evident in Empedocles, who admired him as 'a man of surpassing knowledge . . . who had acquired the utmost wealth of understanding'.[65] In praising Pythagoras as 'master especially of all kinds of wise works',[66] Empedocles was alluding not to

[60] Barnes 1979: 100–14; Hermann 2004: 20.
[61] e.g. Plato, *Rep.* 600 AB; Burkert 1972: 215–17; Huffman 2003: 404; Macris 2003, 2006*a*, *b*; Riedweg 2005: 1.
[62] Burkert 1972: 147; Macris 2003: 264.
[63] Burkert 1972: 110–12; Riedweg 2005: 42.
[64] Riedweg 1997; 2005: 43.
[65] Empedocles, *DK* 129 (Porph. *Vita Pyth.* 30); Detienne 1963: 79–85; Burkert 1972: 137; Macris 2003: 255–7; Riedweg 2005: 54–5, 77.
[66] *Sophôn epiêranos ergôn.*

mundane skills, but rather to miraculous acts that were within the powers of the semi-divine sage. In fact, Pythagoras is credited not only with knowledge of past and future—he remembered his previous incarnations and predicted earthquakes and other events[67]—but also with the capacity to apply his knowledge for practical purposes, for instance, to suppress winds and to calm storms.[68] His golden thigh, ability to bilocate, employ magical healing skills, and chase away pestilences, and other extraordinary traits,[69] as well as his catabasis,[70] belong to the sphere which was associated with Apollo by the Greeks, and which is connected by many modern scholars with shamanic experiences.[71] Pythagoras' gift of treating sick souls by means of charms, magic, and *mousikê*[72] belongs to the same realm, and recalls the talents of Parmenides and Empedocles—as well as those of Zalmoxis' doctors. In Croton and in Metapontum, where Apollo was among the most prominent gods of the pantheon, Pythagoras was considered Apollo Hyperboreus, or at least the god's progeny.[73] The view of Pythagoras as superhuman was rooted so deeply that even the pragmatic Aristotle observed in a matter-of-fact manner: 'Among rational creatures there are gods and men and creatures like Pythagoras.'[74]

[67] Burkert 1972: 138–44; Hermann 2004: 43; Riedweg 2005: 4, with references.

[68] Porph. *Vita Pythag.* 29; Iamb. *De vita Pyth.* 135; Riedweg 2005: 5.

[69] Diog. Laert. 8. 11–12; Ael. *Var. Hist.* 2. 26, 4. 17; Apollonius *Hist. mirab.* 1. 6; Iamb. *Vita Pyth.* 28, 92, 140; Porph. *Vita Pyth.* 29; cf. Corssen 1912: 30–8; Lévy 1926: 12–14; 1927: 40–2; Detienne 1963: 69–70; Burkert 1972: 141–3, 160; Kingsley 1995: 291, 327.

[70] Lévy 1927: 29; Burkert 1972: 155–61.

[71] Kahn 1960: 32; Detienne 1963: 82; Dodds 1973: 144; Burkert 1972: 140–65; West 1983: 149; Flint *et al.* 1999: 118; for a denial of such associations see Zhmud 1997: 108–16. Pythagoras' connection with the Scythian area is manifested by his attire: Aelian says that he wore trousers (*Var. Hist.* 12. 32; cf. Burkert 1972: 165).

[72] Porph. *Vita Pyth.* 33: *kai tas psuchas de nosountas paremutheito . . . tous men epôidais kai mageiais tous de mousikêi.* Iamb. *Vita Pyth.* 64, 163. For the use of music for magical purposes by Pythagoreans, see Boyancé 1937: 100–31; Dodds 1973: 154; Detienne 1963: 47–8; Hermann 2004: 105. For Pythagoras as healer see Lévy 1927: 42; de Vogel 1966: 232–44; Kingsley 1995: 327, 342; Thorn 1995: 213–14.

[73] Ael. *Var. Hist.* 2. 26; Diog. Laert. 8. 11; Iamb. *Vita Pyth.* 4, 30, 140; Porph. *Vita Pyth.* 28. Corssen 1912: 30–1; Lévy 1927: 7, 10, 44–5; Boyancé 1937: 233–41; Burkert 1972: 141–3, 146–9, with references; Giangiulio 1993; Schefer 1996: 34–8; Riedweg 2005: 71–3. Bolton 1962: 174 proposes a convincing explanation of the reasons which prompted this identification: Hyperboreans were not only the righteous people of Apollo, but as vegetarians, they also provided a prototype of an important aspect of the Pythagorean way of life.

[74] Arist. fr. 192 Rose (Iamb. *Vita Pyth.* 31), Cornford 1952: 108.

The Pythagoreans held their teaching in extreme secrecy, although some important doctrines, such as the immortality of the soul and reincarnation, were well-known to the public.[75] However, some parts of the Pythagorean creed remained ineffable.[76] His disciples were to live through various trials, including prolonged silence,[77] and accept a set of orally transmitted precepts, *akousmata* or *symbola*, without questioning them:[78] in a word, they formed a sect.[79] No wonder that Pythagoras' own house was known as 'the house of mysteries':[80] similar to participants in mystery cults, the Pythagorean brotherhood shared common secrets not to be disclosed to the uninitiated, and required elaborate initiations.[81]

The early Pythagoreans placed emphasis on revealed wisdom and on dreams as a direct way of contact with the divine and a prominent means of divination.[82] The importance of dreams is highlighted by the similarity between the Pythagorean food taboos and requirements imposed on consulters of dream oracles.[83] In fact, Iamblichus explained that Pythagoras prohibited foods which either prevented men from communion with the gods, or interfered with divination, or defiled the soul and the purity of visions.[84] The Pythagoreans appear to have mastered techniques of breath control and used them for manipulation of consciousness.[85] Thus, the Pythagorean teaching was closely affiliated with mystery rites, and valued dreams and visions as crucial ways of reaching divine revelation.

The legend about Pythagoras' descent to Hades existed at a fairly early date:[86] it was known in the third century BC to Hieronymus of

[75] Dicaearchus in Porph. *Vita Pyth.* 19; cf. Her. 2. 123; Diod. 10. 5. 1; Burkert 1972: 122, 179; Kingsley 1995: 368; Bremmer 2002: 12; Brisson 1987.

[76] Iamb. *Vita Pyth.* 31; Diog. Laert. 8. 15.

[77] Diog. Laert. 8. 10; Iamb. *Vita Pyth.* 72–3, cf. Bremmer 1992; Hermann 2004: 53.

[78] Burkert 1972: 166–92; Brisson 1987: 83–4; Kingsley 1995: 319; Hermann 2004: 82–6.

[79] Burkert 1982: 18; Riedweg 2005: 98–104; Seaford 2004: 228; Freyburger-Galland *et al.* 1986: 134–61; cf. Hermann 2004: 33–40, 56.

[80] Iamb. *Vita Pyth.* 143, Timaeus, *FGH* 566 F131.

[81] Burkert 1972: 179; Riedweg 2005: 98–104; Morrison 1956: 149–52; Macris 2003: 253.

[82] Diog. Laert. 8. 32.

[83] Burkert 1972: 177, 190; Kingsley 1995: 283.

[84] *Vita Pyth.* 106–7; cf. Detienne 1963: 43–5; Thorn 1995: 220.

[85] Detienne 1963: 76–85.

[86] Rohde 1925: 601.

Rhodes.[87] Hermippus of Smyrna[88] relates a story about Pythagoras' descent to an underground chamber: living there, he received information on current events from his mother, and after some time made his appearance in the assembly (presumably in Croton), thin as a skeleton, claiming that he had returned from Hades.[89] W. Burkert argues convincingly that the catabasis story, misunderstood by Hermippus, belongs to the archaic core of Pythagoras' legend.[90] It is noteworthy that tradition ascribed to Pythagoras the claim that in his previous incarnations he had been Aithalides and Hermotimus—both renowned as ecstatics whose souls travelled to Hades.[91] In Pythagoras' case the catabasis seems to have been performed not only in soul, but also bodily.

Later biographers of Pythagoras, Porphyry and Iamblichus,[92] reveal that Pythagoras possessed an underground grotto still when on Samos. This place was Pythagoras' 'house of philosophy', *oikeion tês philosophiês*, where he passed days and nights in search of the true knowledge. It was located outside the city and was in contrast to the common hall, *homakoeion*, which he maintained inside the city.[93]

Alone or together with Epimenides,[94] Pythagoras descended into the Idaean cave on Crete, the abode of the Dactyls, the inventors of philosophy.[95] Having been purified with a thunder-stone by one of the Dactyls, Pythagoras first lay prostrate for a whole day, his head

[87] Diog. Laert. 8. 21; 38, fr. 42 Wehrli; cf. Burkert 1972: 103, 155.

[88] Diog. Laert. 8. 41; Tertul. *De anima* 28; Schol. Soph. *El.* 62. cf. Lévy 1926: 36–9; Lévy 1927: 129–36; Carcopino 1944: 214.

[89] Rohde 1925: 600; Kahn 1960: 32; Burkert 1972: 156; Ogden 2001: 120; Bonnechere 2003: 112; Riedweg 2005: 52.

[90] The tradition on the role of Pythagoras' mother in this episode is perhaps a rationalization of the guidance Pythagoras received from the Great Mother, Demeter, as W. Burkert suggests. See Burkert 1972: 159; 1969: 26; cf. Kingsley 1995: 284; Carcopino 1944: 211 on Pythagoric *antra.*

[91] Diog. Laert. 8. 4–5, see also above.

[92] Porph. *Vita Pyth.* 9, Iamb. *Vita Pyth.* 27. As Carcopino 1944: 215 observes, the two authors, who cite almost the same terms in the relevant passages, were probably relying on the same source, presumably Aristoxenes of Tarentum; cf. Riedweg 2005: 10.

[93] Porph. *Vita Pyth.* 20; Carcopino 1944: 216.

[94] Porph. *Vita Pyth.* 17; Diog. Laert. 8. 3; Lévy 1927: 27–9; Cook 1914–40: 1. 646, ii. 933–4; Faure 1964: 114; Riedweg 2005: 11; Blakely 2007: 56–9. Pythagoras is said to have been either Epimenides' pupil or his teacher, Burkert 1972: 152.

[95] Diod. 5. 64. For the importance of the Dactyls in the Pythagorean tradition see Blakely 2007. See also below, Ch. 5.2.

wrapped in the skin of a black ram. Then he entered the cave for almost a month, and on his return performed funeral rites for Zeus. The association of Pythagoras' descent into the Idaean cave with Epimenides may have ensued from the latter's fame as an expert in the mysteries of Cretan caves. The conjunction of these two names indicates that Pythagoras' experience was believed to have gone beyond the acquisition of the standard knowledge of life and death which initiates into mysteries could normally acquire: in the darkness of the cave Pythagoras, like his predecessors Minos and Epimenides, sought divine wisdom and superhuman abilities.

Pythagoras' descents into secret chambers were well-known, and his legend contains several reiterations of this motif. Thus, he was said to have acquired arcane knowledge of gods, descending into underground adyta, in Egypt[96] or in unspecified places elsewhere. Like Epimenides, Pythagoras is credited with consuming special foods that freed him of hunger and thirst,[97] or even with abstaining from food and drink entirely during his sojourns in sacred precincts.[98] In these secluded places, Pythagoras learnt to remain quiet.[99] The latter remarks are significant, since they indicate awareness of the fact that fasting enhanced the effect of subterranean sojourns, and enabled the sojourner to remain silent and motionless in the darkness of the isolated chamber. This was a sure method of fostering delusion.

It is not easy to differentiate precisely between the descents Pythagoras actually performed and later figments, repetitions of the familiar subject. However, the persistent attribution of catabasis stories to Pythagoras, which had become common by the third century, must have been based on some real facts of his biography. The cave preserved its significance in the Pythagorean doctrine for centuries. Porphyry emphasizes that the Pythagoreans and Plato conceived of the cosmos as a cave.[100] It is plausible that even later Pythagoreans practised catabasis: the first-century AD hypogeum in

[96] Diog. Laert. 8. 3; Iambl. *De vita Pyth.* 19; Burkert 2002: 19; Assmann 2002. Cf. Ch. 5.2 below.

[97] Porph. *Vita Pyth.* 34. The earliest account of Pythagoras' fasting in a subterranean chamber is Hermippos' narration.

[98] Iamb. *Vita Pyth.* 141; Riedweg 2005: 33.

[99] *Êremein epoiei manthanonta,* Hippol. *Refut.* 1. 2. 18.

[100] *De antro Nympharum* 5–8: *antron kai spêlaion ton kosmon apephênanto.*

Rome near Porta Maggiore probably belonged to an elitist Pythagorean association.[101]

Even if some accounts of Pythagoras' catabaseis, as well as other abnormal deeds, are late elaborations of his life legend, they reflect the fundamental idea that a true sage's way to wisdom comprises withdrawals to caves and/or underground chambers. The episode related by Hermippus is however too esoteric to be a late figment, and the comparison between Zalmoxis and Pythagoras would have been seen as odd if the great teacher's underground sojourns had not been familiar to Herodotus' contemporaries. Thus, later additions seem to have a reliable basis, and Pythagoras' retreats into seclusion shaped his own outlook, and probably continued to influence his followers centuries after his death.

3. PARMENIDES AND THE ELEATICS

The building with the cryptoporticus in Elea

The philosophical school which flourished from the sixth century BC till the first centuries AD in the Greek colony Elea, called Velia by the Romans, was known as the Eleatic school. It was founded by the great Parmenides, the most important among the Presocratic philosophers and the founder of ontology, which remains at the core of philosophy to the present day.[102] The head of a philosophic association in Elea was called *phôlarchos*, 'lord of the den', as attested to by inscriptions discovered there in 1962:[103]

[101] Cumont 1918; Carcopino 1944: *passim*, esp. 213–16; Freyburger-Galland *et al.* 1986: 222–7; cf. Burkert 1972: 155. For Roman Pythagorean 'lodges' see Freyburger-Galland *et al.* 1986: 207–22.

[102] Curd 1999: 3.

[103] The term, as well as the pholarch's functions, are discussed in a number of works: Pugliese Carratelli 1970, 1963, 1965*b*, 1986, 1988, 1990; Nutton 1970; Musitelli 1980; Sacco 1981; Kingsley 1995: 225; Ustinova 2004. In recent years, P. Kingsley has developed his views in two books addressed to general public (1999, 2005); some of the ideas he puts forward there seem farfetched and lack proper argumentation.

Oulis son of Euxinos of Hyele (Elea),[104] *iatros,*
phôlarchos, in the year 379 [on the base of a male statue];
Oulis son of Ariston, *iatros, phôlarchos,*
in the year 280 [on a herm];
Oulis son of Hieronymos, *iatros, phôlarchos,*
in the year 446[105] [on a herm].

The text inscribed on the third herm is different:

Parmenides son of Pyres Ouliad *phusikos.*[106]

The inscriptions were discovered within a large building (*c.*71 × 37 m), which was initially constructed in the Julio-Claudian period, but its upper part was refaced in the time of Hadrian.[107] A subterranean chamber known as a cryptoporticus was unearthed beneath it.[108] The building also contained statues of Asclepius and Hygieia and a number of portrait heads, as well as surgical or toilet instruments, strigils, and other artefacts.[109]

The complex was the seat of the Eleatic association.[110] The building featured certain characteristics one would expect to find in a complex that served as the seat of a philosophic association. In fact, it resembles gymnasia and is congruent with the descriptions of the Academia and the Lycaeum.[111] Furthermore, even if the building ceased to serve as the seat of the association in the second century, this does not preclude its use for this purpose prior to the rebuilding. It is unfeasible that all the statues and other artefacts were moved there *en bloc* from elsewhere as rubbish, just to serve as a fill. Thus, at least during the Julio-Claudian period, the building with the cryptoporticus belonged to the Ouliads.[112]

The discovery of the cryptoporticus in the Elean complex is highly significant. It was constructed to accommodate activities carried out

[104] For the name of the city see Strabo 6. 1. 1.

[105] Or 445: the reading is uncertain.

[106] *SEG* 38. 1020; cf. *SEG* 39. 1078; *Bull.* 78 (1965), 490; Masson 1988*b*: 176, figs. 1–3; Fabbri and Trotta 1989: 69–75.

[107] Napoli 1966: 223–5; Nutton 1970: 211–12. A detailed publication of the complex: Fabbri and Trotta 1989. On the date of the building see Fabbri and Trotta 1989: 27–8.

[108] Ibid. table 17. 1–2.

[109] For the statues see de Franciscis 1970; Jucker 1968; Fabbri and Trotta 1989: 79–118.

[110] Ebner 1962; Pugliese Carratelli 1963; Fabbri and Trotta 1989: 119, 125.

[111] Ibid. 120–1.

[112] Cf. ibid. 23.

underground by an association headed by pholarchs, 'lords of the den'. This cryptoporticus, like the basilica at the Porta Maggiore in Rome, constitutes precious archaeological testimony to the catabasis of philosophers.

The dates of the pholarchy probably relate to 440 BC, the death of Parmenides, a great philosopher, the founder of the Eleatic school, and a lawgiver,[113] rather than to the foundation of the city of Elea about 540 BC. This would yield *c.*61 BC, 160 BC, and AD 16 for the three herms, respectively.[114] Thus, the tradition continued for several hundred years: the word 'pholarch' also occurs there in two Latin inscriptions, on a fragment of a marble slab and on a tombstone.[115] If indeed the Eleatics started their time-reckoning from the death of the founder of their school, this would bear witness to their strong *esprit de corps* and, first and foremost, to their loyalty to the founder and his teaching.

The name of all the pholarchs, Oulis, is meaningful. Apollo Oulios is an Ionian healing deity worshipped in Miletus, on Delos, and elsewhere.[116] One of the statues discovered in the complex with the cryptoporticus has been identified as a representation of Apollo Oulios.[117] The cult of this god must have been imported to Elea from Ionia by the first settlers. Oulis is a theophoric name recorded in several cities. This name may have been adopted by every pholarch upon taking office,[118] whereas *Ouliadês* in respect to Apollo Oulios

[113] Parmenides' biography: *DK* 28A 1–12; Guthrie 1962–7: ii. 1–3; Hermann 2004: 127–47; Cordero 2004: 3–11; his activities as a lawgiver: Plut. *Mor.* 1126AB; Diog. Laert. 9. 23; cf. Strabo 6. 1. 1.

[114] *SEG* 39. 1078, lemma; Fabbri and Trotta 1989: 124–5; Morel 2000: 43. Cf. Pugliese Carratelli 1963: 386; Nutton 1970: 212; Benedum and Michler 1971: 302; *SEG* 38. 1020: 'after ca AD 50'.

[115] *...]APOL[...PH]OLARCHO* : Ebner 1970: 264; Fabbri and Trotta 1989: 70; *V·D·P·HOLARC v(ixit) a(nnos) XLII...*: Pugliese Carratelli 1970: 244; Fabbri and Trotta 1989: 77.

[116] Strabo 14. 1. 6; Suda, s.v. *Oulios*; Macrob. *Sat.* 1. 17. 21. Cf. Oppermann 1942; Laumonier 1958: 553–4; Gigante 1964; Benedum 1971; Masson 1988*b*. A 5th-cent. tombstone from Olbia on the Black Sea coast belongs to [O]ulios son of [Th]eodotos from Elea (Vinogradov 2000). It is impossible to determine whether this Eleaen Oulios was also one of the Ouliads and a practising physician, as Vinogradov suggests.

[117] Schneider 1998.

[118] Benedum and Michler regard the Ouliads as a genos (*Geschlecht*) (Benedum and Michler 1971: 299). In their opinion, the name Ouliades was hereditary in this genos of Eleatic philosophers, traditionally worshippers of Apollo Oulios, to which Parmenides belonged.

means follower of the vocation and worshipper, similar to *Asclepiadês* in respect to Asclepius in the medical school on Cos.[119] The age-old tradition was to hand down professional knowledge, especially secret knowledge of crafts, magic, and healing, within a family. The Ouliads were probably regarded as a family, like the Hippocratic doctors of the sanctuary of Asclepius on Cos who called themselves Asclepiads.[120]

Although pholarchs are called *iatroi*, healers or physicians, the corporation in Elea was not a medical training establishment.[121] It was rather a much looser association of philosophers, united around the cult of Apollo Oulios,[122] which in Elea dates perhaps from its foundation by the Phocaeans (*c.*540 BC). The medical art practised by the Ouliads was different from that of the rational Hippocratic school.[123] An Elean inscription[124] *Oulia[des] iatrom[antis Apoll…*, most probably means 'Ouliad the healer-prophet to Apollo' and would be a perfect definition of a sorcerer or a medicine man, claiming to treat by charms[125]—a procedure despised by Hippocrates,[126] but practised by Thracian healers as well as by Greek philosophers, such as Pythagoras, the Pythagoreans, and Empedocles, and praised by Socrates.[127] The traditional art of the healer-prophet, or revealer of healing remedies, was in fact held in great respect by

[119] Pugliese Carratelli 1970: 246; 1986: 109; Masson 1988*b*: 180. Fabbri and Trotta reject the identification of the building with the cryptoporticus as a sanctuary of Asclepius, since it lacked a hieron and other characteristics of a sanctuary (1989: 120–1). In fact, a sanctuary of Asclepius was perhaps recently discovered elsewhere in Velia (Tocco Sciarelli 2000).

[120] Pugliese Carratelli 1986: 109; Burkert 2004: 55. The founder of the Eleatic school Parmenides adopted his disciple Zeno, probably following this custom (Diog. Laert. 9. 25).

[121] Ebner, Pugliese Carratelli, Sacco, and Musitelli tend to overestimate the medical aspect in the activities of the Elean corporation, at the expense of other activities.

[122] Nutton 1970; Benedum 1971: 929–35; Rawson 1985: 30–1; Morel 2000: 43–4; Pugliese Carratelli 1970: 246.

[123] This explains the lack of evidence on medical practitioners or a medical school in Elea (Nutton 1970: 217–18).

[124] Ebner 1970: 262; Pugliese Carratelli 1970: 247; Fabbri and Trotta 1989: 69.

[125] On incantations as healing technique see Boyancé 1937: 40–1; Bernand 1991: 117–18; Dickie 2001: 24–5.

[126] *De morbo sacro* 4; cf. Lloyd 1979: 15–21; Bernand 1991: 229–31; Graf 1997: 30; Lloyd 2003: 41–5.

[127] Above, Chs. 2.3 and 4.2, and below, Ch. 4.4. See Lloyd 1979: 39–58 for the overlap between methods of healing practised by Hippocratic doctors, temple medicine, 'drug-sellers', and charlatans.

many: in the *Eumenides*, Aeschylus presents Apollo as *iatromantis*,[128] and in the *Suppliants*, Apollo's son Apis is described as *iatromantis*, who worked the cure of terrible plagues 'by surgery and spells'.[129]

The Ouliad healers seem to have been religious practitioners, who assumed the role of healers on certain occasions, and used magical techniques, similar to those attributed to Pythagoras and Empedocles. The title *iatros* bestowed much honour on its bearers: Parmenides' follower Empedocles listed healers and prophets among the noblest incarnations a human soul can reach.[130]

Given this background, the title *phusikos* on the herm of Parmenides the Ouliad should not be taken to mean that he was merely an enquirer into nature, which would be the neutral standard sense of the word.[131] In Italy in particular, the word *phusikos* implies healing and magical activities. A first-century BC bilingual inscription from Atina in Lucania, not far from Elea, describes a certain Menecrates as *phusikos oinodotês* (wine-giving *phusikos*) in Greek and *medicus* in Latin.[132] Menecrates the wine-giving *phusikos* could be a physician or a sorcerer or most probably a healer practising both traditional medicine and magic. As to Parmenides, in an eleventh-century Latin translation of an Arab text, deriving from a late antique source, he is described as *medicus*, and one of his three disciples as partisan of inborn talents and incantations.[133]

[128] The inscription from Elea may be read also as 'Ouliad to Apollo the healer-prophet', although in the context of other Elaean inscriptions this reading is less likely.

[129] *Eum.* 62; *Supp.* 263.

[130] Below, Ch. 4.4. Parmenides was active as a lawgiver: Strabo 6. 1. 1, Plut. *Mor.* 1126A.

[131] Nutton 1970: 218; Flint *et al.* 1999: 100; Pugliese Carratelli 1986: 109. Pugliese Carratelli 1965*b* suggests that the titles *iatros* and *physikos* emphasize the distinction between Parmenides who was not a medical practitioner, and the other Ouliads. In the opinion of Coxon (1986: 39), *phusikos* corresponds to Theophrastus' inclusion of Parmenides in his *Phusikôn doxai* and goes back to the 4th cent. Cf. Nutton 2004: 113, 268–70 on 'medical pluralism', a mixture of various types of healing.

[132] *IG* xiv. 666; Gigante 1988. The use of vines in medicine is attested to by Galen, who links together *iatroi oinodotês kai helleborodotas*, wine-giving and hellebore-giving doctors. An amulet from Sicily describes Moses the magician as *phusikos* (*IG* xiv. 2413, 17 = Pugliese Carratelli 1956: no. 52; cf. Flint *et al.* 1999: 115).

[133] *Tertius ingeniis et incantantionibus adhesit*, *Liber philosophorum moralium antiquorum*: Pugliese Carratelli 1986: 110.

It is noteworthy that Iamblichus[134] connects Parmenides and Empedocles as the most famous *physikoi*: Empedocles the seer and magician cannot be classified as a rational natural philosopher. Parmenides *phusikos* was perhaps able to use his knowledge of natural phenomena for practical purposes, by means of magic, like his disciple Empedocles for whom wisdom was the means to working miracles.[135] The connection between investigation of natural phenomena and magic is explained by M. Mauss:

> [Magic] is not only a practical art, it is also a storehouse of ideas. It attaches great importance to knowledge—one of its mainsprings. In fact as far as magic is concerned, knowledge is power . . . It quickly set up a kind of index of plants, metals, phenomena, beings and life in general, and became an early store of information for the astronomical, physical and natural sciences. It is a fact that certain branches of magic, such as astrology and alchemy, were called applied physics in Greece. That is why magicians receive the name of *phusikoi* and that the word *phusikos* was a synonym for magic.[136]

The difference between a rational doctor and natural scientist, on the one hand, and a healer employing 'surgery and spells' and magician, on the other hand, does not necessarily lie in knowledge or practice, but rather in their view of the world. The former regards nature as a closed system, separate from the divine world: humans belong to the natural world, act within it by natural means, and cannot influence the gods. The latter holds that the divine and human worlds are interconnected, and that a wise man can impose his will on the divine beings.[137]

The characterization of the Ouliads as *iatroi* reflects the pragmatic approach to the role of the sage, whose wisdom was expected to provide practical benefits for himself and other people. These useful results were attained by magic means. The Eleatics did not differ in this respect from Pythagoras and Empedocles, whose magical feats are attested to in ancient sources.

[134] *Vita Pyth.* 166; Plutarch refers to Empedocles as *phusikos* (*Mor.* 515C, *DK* 31 A14).

[135] In Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Socrates and his disciples in the *phrontistêrion* not only possess the knowledge of celestial things, but are also capable of various supernatural feats (below, Ch. 5.2).

[136] Mauss 1972: 143, cited by Kingsley 1995: 229. Cf. Flint *et al.* 1999: 100; Kingsley 1999: 142–4.

[137] Lloyd 1979: 49–58; Graf 1997: 32.

Inscriptions on the herms and the statue of the Ouliads, discovered in the complex with the cryptoporticus, reveal an essential facet of the Eleatic school, their devotion to the cult of the ancestor healing god, their activities as healers, and their understanding of scientific and philosophical knowledge as a way to the mastery of natural forces.

The meaning of the word *phôleos* and the pholarchs of Elea

The interpretation of the much-discussed term pholarch remains controversial.[138] A scrutiny of the word *phôlarchos* and other derivatives of *phôleo* reveals a disagreement on the meaning of the word *phôleos* between the lexicographers and the rest of Greek literature. In the entire corpus of Greek literature the word *phôleos* means 'den', 'lair', or 'hole', usually underground, of snakes, lions, bears, and other animals;[139] *phôleuein* is 'to live or hide in a cave or a hole, to hibernate'. In the ancient texts, these words occur almost exclusively in descriptions of habits of various animals hiding in hollows.

When used to mean 'school',[140] or as a designation of a meeting-place of *thiasoi*, the word *phôleos* and its derivatives are cited in two groups of sources, mostly late antique and medieval. The association between *phôleos* and schools in the commentaries to the *Odyssey* derives from a fallacious popular etymology.[141] Both Suda and Hesychius also take the word to mean 'school' in the first place, and mention 'den' or 'cave' as a less important meaning only. Suda, Pollux, and Hesychius further complicate the matter by adding another meaning of *phôleos*, presumably 'place where voluntary cult organizations, *thiasoi*, held

[138] See Ustinova 2004 for a detailed discussion.

[139] e.g. Arist. *Hist. anim. passim*, esp. 599a–600b, where these words occur many times. See also Musitelli 1980. In a few contexts *phôleos* or *phôleuein* are used metaphorically in reports of unusual human behaviour: Strabo 11. 5. 7, 14. 1. 44; Jos. *De bello Jud.* 4. 9. 3; Plut. *Quest. Conviv.* 733D (Artist. fr. 43 Rose). The meaning of the word *phôleos* in a very short fragment of Callimachus (Fr. 68 Pfeiffer) remains an open question, cf. Pugliese Carratelli 1970: 245; Ustinova 2004: 29.

[140] Accepted almost unanimously by modern scholars: for instance, Benedum and Michler 1971: 302; Fabbri and Trotta 1989: 72.

[141] Apollonius, *Lexicon Homericum*, s.v. *apophôlia;* Eusthatius *Comm. in Hom. Od.* i. 207, ad *Od.* 5. 182; *Od.* 11. 249. Both Chantraine and Frisk unanimously reject the ancient etymologies: Chantraine 1983–4, s.v. *apophôlios*; Frisk 1973–9: s.v. *apophôlios*.

their banquets'.[142] The existence of the pholarchs in the Eleatic association provides a feasible explanation for the later connection of *phôleos* with schools and teaching places, as well as with cult associations. Misunderstanding of the reasons for the strange designation of the Elean corporation (to be discussed shortly) gave rise to various false etymologies of the word *phôleos* by later commentators.

The word *phôleos* occurs at least once in an account of a cult, in Strabo's description of a cave *iatromanteion* at Acharaca in Caria.[143] Temporary comparison of the initiates to beasts lurking in a den ensues from Euripides' use[144] of the word *thalamê,* an exact synonym of *phôleos*, as a designation of the Trophonium: 'Trophonius' den' or 'Trophonius' cave'.[145] Euripides and Strabo must have had good reasons for their choice of the words *thalamê* and *phôleos* to describe the central cult chambers at Lebadeia and at Acharaca. The notion of animals lurking in a den provided an excellent metaphor for the trance experienced by human suppliants in the subterranean oracular caves.[146]

Several interpretations of the function of *phôleos* in Elea have been put forward. *Phôleos* is compared to underground constructions, used in Asclepiaea to keep the sacred snakes of the god. According to this approach, the pholarch would be a head of the medical association, rivalling that of the Asclepiads.[147] It is also suggested that *phôlarchos* was related to incubation rites, similar to the rites practised either in the underground chambers in the Asclepiaea,[148] or in the *iatromanteion* at Acharaca.[149] However, in medical oracles, Asclepiaea among them, incubation was normally restricted to the diseased, who received instructions directly from the deity:[150] it was only in Acharaca that the priests were allowed to enter the cave. In contrast, although the pholarch of the Ouliads was also *iatromantis,* it may be assumed that members of the corporation 'lurked in the den' on their own behalf, as a part of ceremonies for Apollo Oulios,

[142] Suda, s.v. *phôleon*; Hesych, s.v. *phôleon*; Suda, s.v. *phôlêtoroi*; Hesych., s.v. *phôlêtêriois.*

[143] See above, Ch. 2.2.

[144] *Ion* 394.

[145] See above, Ch. 2.3.

[146] Ustinova 2004: 28–33.

[147] Pugliese Carratelli 1970: 245.

[148] Sacco 1981: 239. Musitelli 1980: 253–4; Leiwo 1980; McKay 2000: 11 finds 'connotations of hibernation' in the title *pholarch.*

[149] Kingsley 1995: 225; 1999: 77–86; McKay 2000: 11.

[150] Hamilton 1906: *passim.*

and not only on behalf of the sick. Thus, the connection between the Eleatic pholarchs and incubation, either in caverns or in temple adyta, which apparently existed, seems to have been indirect.

It is much more probable that pholarchs in Elea adopted the Pythagorean tradition of philosophers' descent into underground chambers. The Eleatic philosophy was profoundly influenced by Pythagoras,[151] and healing played an essential role in the Pythagorean teaching and practice.[152] Naturally, both schools were also engaged in other activities, alongside medicine. It is suggested that the 'den' was founded in the fifth century by Parmenides himself,[153] a Pythagorean by training.[154] It is significant that Diogenes Laertius, in his account of Parmenides' teachers, notes that the Pythagorean Ameinias converted him to *hêsuchia*, 'a contemplative life', literally 'silence', that is, the Pythagorean life.[155] Parmenides' *hêsuchia* could imply not only introspective serenity, but also recurrent withdrawals into the quiet of an underground chamber[156] in order to attain divine revelation.

Parmenides' poem

Whereas the tenets of Pythagoras are known from the writings of others, Parmenides, the founder of the Eleatic school, expounds his creed and the way he arrived at it in a hexameter poem.[157] Extensive fragments of this text survived. The very choice of epic verse rather than prose, which by Parmenides' time had already been used by Heraclitus, is meaningful. In contrast to prose, poetry was believed to be inspired by divinity, hence by definition, as a genre, supposedly contained an uttering of superhuman wisdom.[158]

In the opening lines of the poem, known as the *proem* (prologue), Parmenides describes his own catabasis as a youth, *kouros,* into the

[151] Diog. Laert. 9. 21; cf. Kingsley 1995: 323 n. 22, 333.

[152] Iamb. *Vita Pyth.* 18; Boyancé 1937: 104; Pugliese Carratelli 1963: 386; Kingsley 1995: 331.

[153] Burkert 1969: 22; Rawson 1985: 31, cf. Benedum 1971: 929.

[154] Diog. Laert. 9. 21–3, cf. Tarán 1965: 3; Coxon 1986: 18; Riedweg 2005: 115.

[155] Coxon 1986: 38; cf. Hermann 2004: 129.

[156] Kingsley 1999: 177–83.

[157] Parmenides' poetic dialect is heavily dependent on Homeric and Hesiodic patterns, Guthrie 1962–7: ii. 10; Pellikaan 1974; Gallop 1984: 4; Coxon 1986: 7–11.

[158] See Ch. 3.2.

underworld. The mares swiftly bring his chariot along the road of the divinity (*daimôn*), 'that bears the man who knows over all cities'.[159] The all-encompassing revelation which awaits him is anticipated by the daughters of the Sun who escort him: after they 'leave the house of Night for the light',[160] they unveil, that is, reveal their essence to Parmenides. Having passed the gates where the paths of Night and Day meet,[161] the youth arrives at the 'yawning abyss' (*chasma achanes*).[162] At the end of Parmenides' journey, the goddess (*thea*) greets him kindly and reveals to him 'the unshakable heart of the rounded truth', as opposed to the false beliefs of mortals.[163]

This is a powerful depiction of a spiritual journey.[164] The flight 'over all cities' (*kata pant' astê*[165]) is reminiscent of ecstatic flights of

[159] Contrary to the majority opinion, Morrison 1955: 59 and Kingsley 2002: 371 suggest that it is the female divinity rather than the road that bears Parmenides, who therefore is portrayed here as *theolêptos,* seized by the deity. Whatever the correct reading of this phrase, the context of the fragment leaves no doubt about the role of the goddess as the ultimate source of Parmenides' wisdom, and the ecstatic nature of the road leading to it.

[160] W. Burkerts compares 'the house of Night' with the Orphic 'cave of Night', the seat of the primordial oracle (Burkert 1969: 17; West 1983: 109).

[161] Furley 1973: 4.

[162] *DK* 1; cf. Burkert 1969: 12; Kingsley 1995: 252 n. 6. See Owens 1979: 21 against the view that 'yawning gap' is reminiscent of the Hesiodic description of the Tartaros as a 'great chasm' in the *Theogony* 740 (Pellikaan 1974: 8, 24, 53–4). Coxon's interpretation, 'made vacant the gulf of the gateway' (1986: 46), suggests a two-, rather than three-dimensional picture of the chasm.

[163] Fr. 1 *DK*; Morrison 1955: 60; Burkert 1969: 15; Pugliese Carratelli 1988: 342. Cf. Bowra 1937: 112; Detienne 1996: 130–1; Curd 1999: 18–21. The gesture of handclasp is meaningful: it symbolizes Parmenides' equality with the goddess and is a pledge of her eagerness to disclose the truth to him (Mansfeld 2005).

[164] 'Genuine visionary experience': Coxon 1986: 156; cf. Verdenius 1942: 67; 1948; West 1971: 226; White 2005: 20, 74; Diels 1897: 14; Cornford 1952: 118; Guthrie 1962–7: ii. 11; Claus 1981: 111; 'a robust visionary experience': Nieto 1997: 36. Even if reluctant to admit the existence of shamanic experiences in Greece Kirk *et al.* 1983: 244 define Parmenides' *proem* as a description of 'a path of thought ("a highway") which leads to a transcendent comprehension both of changeless truth and of mortal opinion'. Tarán 1965: 21–31 assumes that this journey has nothing to do with real experience, and argues that the *proem* does not depict a religious revelation, but is a part of a literary device. He does not contend that the *proem* is in the form of a revelation, but suggests that Parmenides chose to present his doctrine in the form of the goddess's monologue in order to render his innovative doctrine more trustworthy. The interpretation of the *proem* as a description of a spiritual journey is questioned also by Hermann 2004: 163; Cordero 2004: 23.

[165] The word is not in the manuscripts. The conjecture by Coxon 1968; 158 is accepted by most commentators. *Contra*: Cordero 2004: 27; Hermann 2004: 155.

archaic personages, such as Aithalides, Abaris, Aristeas, and Hermotimus, whose souls wandered to remote countries and returned enriched with magic knowledge and mantic abilities. The life legend of Aristeas even brought him to Metapontum and to a meeting with Pythagoras.[166] There is no doubt that Parmenides was familiar with the traditions of Abaris and Aristeas, and the *proem* probably refers to comparable out-of-body experiences. Furthermore, visual apparitions experienced at the earlier stage of mental vortex are described in some modern accounts as 'cities of light'.

The controversy about the direction of Parmenides' journey, whether to the heavens and enlightenment[167] or into the netherworld,[168] has led some commentators to the conclusion that it is unclear where the *kouros* went.[169] In fact, Parmenides' journey was into the netherworld, to light and enlightenment at its end. The main elements of the mental vortex are present here: swift moving from darkness into the light, a gate opening magically, entrance into a deep chasm, a benevolent supreme being looking out for the traveller at the end of his journey, and an overwhelming joy at comprehending the greatest mystery of the world.

The *kouros*'s chariot is a polyvalent image, consistently occurring in Greek literature, starting from Pindar, via Empedocles and Plato, where it symbolizes the soul as the united force of the horses and their charioteer, to the Pythagorean *Golden Verses*.[170] The image of a chariot-ride to enlightenment via the darkness is not limited to the Greek world: as we saw in Chapter 1, this theme is known in Jewish and Islamic mysticism. Comparison to a chariot-ride through the

[166] Above, Ch. 4.2.

[167] Fränkel 1975: 365; Mansfeld 1964: 234–47; Diels 1897: 14; Cornford 1952: 118; Guthrie 1962–7: ii. 11; Claus 1981: 111.

[168] Mourelatos 1970: 42–4; Burkert 1969; Miller 1979: 28; Kingsley 1999: 93–100; 'catabasis of a familiar kind': Furley 1973: 2; descent of a shaman to the netherworld: Morrison 1955: 59; a cyclic journey culminating in catabasis to the House of Night: Pellikaan 1974: 60–2.

[169] Tarán 1965: 24; Owens 1979; Austin 1986; Curd 1999: 19; cf. Mourelatos 1970: 14–16; Morgan 2000: 78; Hermann 2004: 166. For overviews of interpretations of Parmenides' journey (literal, religious, allegorical, and rationalist) see Pellikaan 1974: 63–78; Owens 1979; Couloubaritsis 1986: 80–129.

[170] Pind. *Ol.* 6. 22; 9. 80; *Isthm.* 2. 1–3, 9. 62; Empedocles, *DK* B3; Plato, *Phaedr.* 246A; *Golden Verses* (69, cf. Hierocles *Comm.* 16); cf. Morrison 1955: 59; Tarán 1965: 31; Fränkel 1975: 351; West 1997*a*: 205; Cordero 2004: 25.

night appears to be the simplest way to convey the sensation of swift moving through the darkness, typical of the early stages of altered states of consciousness.[171]

The interpretation of Parmenides' journey as a passage to enlightenment via the netherworld is endorsed by the wording of the goddess's greetings: 'No ill fate has sent you to travel this path, which indeed lies far from the steps of men, but right and justice.'[172] 'Ill fate' is death, and this phrase seems to imply that Parmenides is among the few privileged mortals who pass alive into the realm of the goddess, which means that the author perceived the place where he arrived as the netherworld, but knew that for him, the chosen one, the visit would be beneficial.

'The heart of the truth' is an innovative expression: in Greek, heart, *êtor,* is the seat of the inner self of a human or divine being. A. H. Coxon observes that 'Parmenides' phrase does not distinguish reality from its heart but characterizes it as living; the sense is "the unchanging and persuasive living reality." '[173] Here and elsewhere Parmenides appears to struggle with the limits of ordinary language, in order to put into words something that is by its nature beyond words. For him, using language as a means of mediation is problematic, as K. A. Morgan demonstrates: 'At the heart of the goddess' revelation lies the dream of language denying itself, an unshaken kernel where Being is uniform and there is no distance between the referring word and to which it refers.'[174] The ultimate reality of Parmenides is essentially ineffable and is perceived as direct revelation, rather than as a mediated communication. Parmenides' spiritual journey is neither an allegory nor a traditional literary device: the wording of his *proem* demonstrates that we are reading a *post eventum* description of an ecstatic revelation.

It is suggested that Parmenides' goddess is anonymous because he considered the truth revealed to him as his own discovery.[175] However, this interpretation stems from a misunderstanding of the ec-

[171] Above, Ch. 1.2.

[172] *DK* 1; Coxon 1986: 167, cf. Loenen 1959: 72–4.

[173] Coxon 1986: 168; cf. Seaford 2004: 229 on this phrase as a hint to mystic initiation.

[174] Morgan 2000: 85. Fränkel 1975: 365: the wording of the poem discloses the great effort invested by Parmenides in expounding his teaching.

[175] Fr. 122: *thea,* 'goddess'. Verdenius 1942: 67; 1948: 120; Bowra 1937: 106.

static aspect of Parmenides' experience: for him, the truth was not a product of his personal rational deliberation, but rather a reality revealed to him by a figure existing outside his mind, namely the goddess. Furthermore, Parmenides' confidence in the divine revelation and mistrust of human wisdom is congruent with the traditional Greek conviction, discussed in the Introduction, that human understanding is deceitful and the true knowledge belongs to the gods.

But it is not only the *proem* to Parmenides' poem that reveals the ecstatic essence of his worldview. The conception itself originates in mystical insight. The core of Parmenides' teaching is that reality is an undifferentiated whole. This is the essence of Parmenides' own words:[176]

> Come now, and I will tell you (and you must carry my account away with you when you have heard it) the only ways of enquiry that are to be thought of. The one, that [it] is and that it is impossible for [it] not to be, is the path of Persuasion (for she attends upon truth); the other, that [it] is not and that it is needful that [it] not be, that I declare to you is an altogether indiscernible track: for you could not know what is not—that cannot be done—nor indicate it. (Translation by Kirk, Raven, and Schofield.)

And another passage:[177] 'Nor it is divided, since it all exists alike . . . So it is all continuous . . . But changeless within the limits of great bonds it exists without beginning or ceasing . . . Remaining the same and in the same place it lies on its own and thus fixed it will remain . . .' This and other passages reflect Parmenides' radical monism. The diversity of things perceived by the senses of mortals, for Parmenides, is the deceitful Way of Seeming: all change, motion, and differentiation are illusory. The divine Way of Truth is to comprehend reality as unitary, eternal, indivisible, and motionless. Thinking, being, and uttering coalesce.[178]

For K. Popper, the core of Parmenides' insight is 'that divine knowledge of reality is rational and therefore truthful, while human opinion of appearance is based upon our senses, which are not only unreliable but totally misleading'.[179] Elsewhere Popper stresses the extreme discrepancy between Parmenides' teaching and common sense:

[176] *DK* B2. [177] *DK* B8, cf. Loenen 1959: 3–124, esp. 82–4.

[178] See Trépanier 2004: 131–44 for a defence of the current consensus on Parmenides' monism.

[179] Popper 2001: 97.

What is shocking in Parmenides' poem (and constitutes a complete break with the old tradition that distinguishes between divine knowledge and human fallible conjecture) is not that the goddess declares our human world of experience to be false and illusory, but that she reveals, and claims to be true—and even proves!—a theory of reality that must seem impossible and even insane to every sane person.[180]

Parmenides was adamant in his insistence that this 'insane' revelation was the only, divine, and eternal truth. All the mundane experience of his life meant nothing in comparison with the intensity of his insight. Such a paradoxical doctrine, discarding whatever Parmenides could have learnt from his cultural and physical environment, 'is not derived from cold deduction but from direct perception, a mystical experience', as M. West observes.[181] For H. Fränkel, the 'radical, even brutal, consistency' of Parmenides' thought proves that the philosopher experienced and realized his conception personally, having achieved 'the *unio mystica* with true Being'.[182]

A comparison between Parmenides' 'heart of the truth' and mystic experiences discussed in Chapter 1 is instructive.[183] The heart of the mystical insight achieved in altered states of consciousness is that the world of appearances is an illusion, and the underlying reality is the eternal loving unchangeable oneness.[184] The mystic is so completely absorbed in the contemplation of the one truth of the world that he or she obliterates all perception of the physical world. At the peak of mystical experience, at the state of absolute unitary

[180] Popper 2001: 69.

[181] West 1971: 222–3; Seaford 2004: 229. I am grateful to Richard Seaford who drew my attention to M. West's ideas on the subject.

[182] Fränkel 1975: 366–7. Parmenides obtained his understanding of the truth 'by a kind of grace', Snell 1960: 148. Cf. Nieto 1997: 35: 'the act of disclosure and revelation', 'nothing less than disclosure of divine grace'. K. Popper describes the paths followed by Parmenides and Xenophanes to their conceptions in similar terms. Parmenides' journey to the goddess was 'an experience of enrapture', 'a real revelation—a great flash of light' (Popper 2001: 69, 70). And about Xenophanes, who was perhaps Parmenides' mentor, he writes: 'Nobody who knows anything about the psychology of knowledge can doubt that this new insight [the idea of one god] must have appeared like a revelation to Xenophanes' (Popper 2001: 45).

[183] In his book on the varieties of mystical experiences, R. C. Zaehner compares Parmenides' transcendence of time and space to the revelations of Richard Jefferies, an English mystic of the 19th cent. (Zaehner 1961: 47, cf. 141).

[184] Blackmore 1993: 149.

being, no sense of time and space exists, and absolute reality is attained, which is conceptualized as the sensation of union with the God or the Absolute. For people who have experienced mystical revelation, this state, and even the memory of it, carries the sense of greater fundamental reality than the reality generated by their awareness of day-to-day living. The congruity between Parmenides' truth and mystical reality is astonishing.

The goddess instructs Parmenides to verify by rational methods any knowledge acquired by revelation: 'estimate by reason (*krinai logôi*) the hard-hitting refutation (*poludêris elegchos*) uttered by me'.[185] These verses ostensibly indicate the path to be taken from experiencing a vision to its comprehension and expression: the insight gained in an altered state of consciousness must be reconsidered in a normal state of mind, by means of rational judgement.[186] Moreover, it was the awareness of the divine truth that was initially mystical and had to be put into imperfect human words later; as for the critical analysis of the human world of appearances, Parmenides' mundane waking logic was sufficient.[187]

It appears plausible that Parmenides' spiritual endeavour was a part of initiation ceremonies, required for the admission into the Eleatic association. In Parmenides' *proem,* the journey to the realm of the goddess is undertaken by a youth, *kouros*, of an age which was, by tradition, the time for the most significant transition rites in the life of a Greek man.[188] The element of initiations into mystery rites is evident in the unveiling of the hidden ultimate truth to the *kouros.* However, before meeting the goddess, the *kouros* had already been 'the man who knows', and had travelled the road which 'lies far from the paths of men',[189] which implies that he possessed secret know-

[185] *DK* 7; cf. Verdenius 1942: 64; Furley 1973: 9–10.

[186] West 1971: 223; Curd 1999: 20.

[187] Fränkel 1975: 367.

[188] Verdenius 1948: 119; Morgan 2000: 74. See however Tarán 1965: 16; Cordero 2004: 24 for different interpretations of the word *kouros.*

[189] *DK* 1; Verdenius 1948: 120; Burkert 1969: 5; Kingsley 1999: 62, 71–5. According to Tarán 1965: 30, the wording of the *proem* suggests that the journey was undertaken by the author on multiple occasions (cf. Couloubaritsis 1986: 92; Coxon 1986: 161). If indeed it is so, we have evidence of recurring experiences of an altered state of consciousness. Tarán's inference that revelation could not be repeated is at variance with numerous instances of people experiencing recurrence of divine revelations, described in detail as his own frequent experiences by Plotinus (*Enneads* 4. 8. 1. 1–10) and reported in modern neuropsychological research, discussed in Ch. 1.

ledge concealed from ordinary mortals.[190] The *proem* appears to suggest two stages of initiations, the lower stage endowing the select few with the ability to take the mystical road to the goddess, and the higher stage comprising the ultimate revelation.

Another link connecting Parmenides' poem with mystery initiations is suggested by his vision of the universe. Parmenides depicts it as a series of rotating alternating fiery and dark wreaths or rings (*stephanai*), with the goddess, *Dikê* or *Anagkê* (Justice or Necessity) in the middle steering them on:[191]

Parmenides said that there were rings wound one around the other, one formed of the rare, the other of the dense; and that there were others between these compounded of light and darkness. That which surrounds them all like a wall is, he says, by nature solid; beneath is a fiery ring; and likewise what lies in the middle of them all is solid; and around it is again a fiery ring. The middlemost of the mixed rings is the [primary cause] of movement and of coming into being for them all, and he calls it the goddess that steers all, the holder of the keys, Justice and Necessity. (Translation by Kirk, Raven, and Schofield.)

This obscure construction, which defies realistic interpretation,[192] appears to resemble a psychedelic mental picture of a spinning swirl. It is noteworthy that H. Hoffmann attained similar awareness when practising symbol contemplation, and records how this experience led him to an insight into Parmenides' thinking.[193] Contrast of darkness and light was a crucial part of the setting in many mystery cults.[194] The Orphic primordial cave of Night, from where the demiurge Phanes created the world, was a misty place illuminated by his radiance.[195] The identification of the divine being as a goddess emerging from the

[190] Coxon suggests that this qualification assumes the *kouros*'s adherence to an association resembling the Pythagorean community (Coxon 1986: 15–16). Cf. Seaford 2004: 262–5 on the influence of mystery cults on Parmenides.

[191] *DK* A37, Aetius 2. 7. 1; cf. *DK* B12.

[192] Guthrie 1962–7: ii. 62; Kirk *et al.* 1983: 259. For a different approach see Morrison 1955.

For the influence of Parmenides' cosmological visions on Greek philosophy, and in particular on Democritus, Coxon 1986: 22–37.

[193] Hoffmann 2001/2: 132–4. [194] Below, Ch. 5.2.

[195] West 1983: 213–14, see also above, Ch. 2.

flashing swirl of light and dark might have been suggested to Parmenides by his acquaintance with the practice of mystery initiations. It is plausible, however, that images of alternating light and darkness, both in Parmenides' poem and in Orphic texts depict visions of vortex experienced in states of trance.

The philosopher's journey is pictured in the *proem* as a drive of the initiate to the world of beyond, where the goddess discloses to him the ultimate truth. These are the images suggested by Parmenides' cultural environment and based on the epic conventions. This literary description serves as verbal rendering for a primary mental experience of the vortex, ecstatic passage through a dark space to the blissful awareness of the shining 'unchanging living reality', through which the author lived, perhaps on several occasions.[196]

At this point we are able to draw a connection between sensory deprivation in the den (*phôleos*), Parmenides' ecstatic visions, and his tenets. Parmenides was an Ouliad, a leader of the association which owned the building with the cryptoporticus. In the quiet darkness of the subterranean chamber Parmenides could enjoy almost total isolation from the disturbances of the outer world. A subjective sense of absolute spacelessness and of limitlessness of the self is prominent in the descriptions of sensory deprivation. This sensation is interpreted by the mind as infinite space and eternity, or spacelessness and timelessness—and this is what Parmenides claimed as his main revelation. The sensation of limitless self, or no self at all, may be conceived later as a state of being at one with the universe or creator. Another subjective result of sensory isolation may be attainment of an out-of-body experience (known also as soul flight, soul journey, or astral projection as discussed in Chapter 1)—and this is what he describes in his *proem*.

[196] This understanding of Parmenides' personality is in striking contrast to the view of Parmenides as an ancient counterpart to modern 'armchair philosophers'. Thus, Coxon interprets the passage through the darkness to illumination as basically the intellectual feat of 'a Pythagorean philosopher at the crisis of his career' (1986: 170–1). In Owens's view, 'the imagery of the proem, like carefully chosen background music, sets the tone for philosophical reflection' (Owens 1979: 25).

The den of the Eleatics

The cryptoporticus discovered in the building belonging to the Ouliads was most probably called *phôleos*. It could serve as the place where the pholarch presided over the meetings of the Ouliads. In terms of organization, philosophic schools were regarded by the Greeks as private associations. These associations were focused on cults, first and foremost of the Muses, and could therefore be called cult associations, *thiasoi*.[197] The fraternity of the Ouliads was such an association,[198] revering Apollo Oulios as its eponymous deity.

The individual quest for truth and revelations in a state of trance, experienced in the depths of the earth, which is reported for several cave oracles, may have undergone some transformations before it became a conventional practice in an association of *phusikoi*. However, the emphasis was still on the direct enlightenment by the deity. Medical and philosophical activities of the Ouliads were focused on the search for universal wisdom and on the cult of Apollo. Following Epimenides, Pythagoras, and Parmenides, who were granted their superhuman knowledge by the gods or daemons during their catabaseis, the Ouliads probably adopted the practice of entering an altered state of consciousness in the darkness and stillness of their den in order to be endowed with divine wisdom and resultant supernatural power.

Further, voluntary confinement in an underground chamber was considered conductive to self-improvement. This idea is reflected in the biographies of later writers. Demosthenes is credited with prolonged descents into a subterranean training place (*katageion meletêtêrion*) in order to practise his rhetorical skills without distraction.[199] Euripides' life legend also comprises withdrawals into a solitary cave.[200] Thus, underground sojourns could also be used for concentration and meditation on philosophic matters by those of the Ouliads who were less prone to altered states of consciousness. In Italy, this tradition left perhaps traces in architecture: Roman shrines of the Muses, abodes of

[197] Von Wilamowitz Möllendorff 1881: 263; Ziebarth 1896: 69–74; Boyancé 1937: 175; Jones 1999: 227–34; *contra* Cherniss 1945: 62; Lynch 1972: 108–27; Schefer 1996: 255. For detailed discussion see Ustinova 2004, 2005*a*.

[198] Pugliese Carratelli 1970: 245.

[199] Plut. *Demosth.* 7, cf. Ogden 2001: 121.

[200] Above, Ch. 3.2.

philosophical contemplation, were shaped as artificial vaults, intended to imitate caves, as Pliny tells us.[201]

4. EMPEDOCLES

Empedocles (*c.*495–435[202]) lived in Acragas in Sicily, and was renowned in antiquity as a philosopher, poet, orator, democratic leader, healer, and sorcerer. He considered the vocations of prophet, bard, healer, and ruler to be the highest point the human soul can reach,[203] and in all probability regarded himself as an incarnation of all of them. Mystic rites, myth, and rationality are interwoven in his two poems which have partially survived, *On the Nature* and the *Purifications.* The dichotomy between religion and natural philosophy was apparently foreign to Empedocles.[204]

In the first lines of the *Purifications* Empedocles introduces himself as a god, revered by men as a healer and prophet:

An immortal god, mortal no more, I go around honored by all . . . by men and women, I am revered. They follow me in their thousands, asking where lies the road to profit, some desiring prophesies, while others ask to hear the word of healing (*baxis*) for every kind of illness . . . [205] (Translation by G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield.)

[201] *Hist. Nat.* 36. 154: 'hollow rocks in the buildings, called *musaea*'. This feature did not exist in the *mouseia* of Greece (Lavagne 1988: 273), which is understandable, given its derivation from the Italian schools, the Pythagorean and the Eleatic. Pliny also refers to a grotto of pearls exhibited during Pompey's triumph in 61 BC as *musaum ex margaritis* (*Hist. Nat.* 37. 14).

[202] Wright 1981: 3; Inwood 2001: 6–8.

[203] *DK* 146–7; see Macris 2006*b* on the 'Apollonian character' of Empedocles' noble vocations.

[204] The assignment of the surviving fragments attributed to Empedocles to two poems is traditional, but debatable; it is suggested that Empedocles expounded his views on a variety of subjects in one and the same epic (Inwood 2001: 8–19; Trépanier 2004: 6–30). The publication of the Strasbourg papyrus endorses the traditional view that there were two poems (Martin and Primavesi 1999: 119). The disparity between Empedocles' philosophic and religious doctrines is recognized by many modern scholars. For the analysis and refutation of this view, Kahn 1960; Kingsley 2002: 341, 355; Inwood 2001: 21–2.

[205] Diog. Laert. 8. 62, *DK* 112; Wright 1981: 264–6; Inwood 2001: 57–8. Interpretation suggested by *DK*, evident from their translation of the fragment ('Ich aber wandle jetzt als unsterblicher Gott'), and accepted by most scholars. An entirely

Empedocles' belief in his power was so great that he boasted in his verses of being able to provide defence against old age, change the direction of the winds, stop storms and bring rain after summer drought, and return the dead from Hades.[206] There were witnesses who reported having seen this healer-prophet (*iatromantis*)[207] practising sorcery (*goêteouôn*);[208] stories were told of his success in raising the dead, healing, and checking the winds, that brought him the title of Hinderer of the Winds (*kôlusanemas*).[209] These accomplishments, the control over weather and the souls, healing, as well as the ability to enter the heaven and the netherworld, are considered worldwide as characteristically shamanic.[210] Empedocles also claimed to have undergone various incarnations: he was a youth and a maiden, a bush and a bird and a fish.[211] These assertions could have been made only by a man of enormous faith in his own magical force. Empedocles' flamboyant

different understanding is put forward by van der Ben 1975: 22–5, who regards this fragment not as Empedocles' claim to divinity, but rather as an ironic statement that ignorant people 'make him look like a god by copious honorings with which they receive him'. Cf. Zuntz 1971: 190. Empedocles' assertion is usually compared to the 4th-cent. golden leaves from Thurii, as for instance *IG* xiv. 641. 1: 'Happy and blessed one, you shall be a god instead of mortal (*theos d'esêi anti brotoio*)' (e.g. Kirk *et al.* 1983: 314). Yet Empedocles puts forward his claims when he is still alive, in contrast to the Orphic golden plates containing instructions for the dead initiates in the realm of Persephone. Cf. Trépanier 2004: 122 on similar expectations of Empedocles' contemporary Theron of Acragas, for whom Pindar wrote his *Second Olympian Ode.*

[206] *DK* 111, Diog. Laert. 8. 59. The fragment caused a vivid ongoing controversy (see Todoua 2005, with bibliography); van Groningen 1956 even considers it unauthentic. For the refutation of the attempts to consider Empedocles' claims not in a literal sense, but rather as allegories see Burkert 1972: 153–4; Kingsley 1995: 217–32. On the importance of this passage as the core of Empedocles' creed, especially in the light of the Strasbourg papyrus, see Todoua 2005. Cf. the attack of the Hippocratic author of *On the Sacred Disease* (ch. 1) against impious rogues who claim to know how to control weather: Lloyd 1979: 37.

[207] *Der Seherartzt*: Kranz 1949: 20–37; Kingsley 1995: 220; 2002: 343; Lloyd 2003: 24–7; cf. Diog. Laert. 8. 58. The use of *baxis* for word is noteworthy, for it meant particularly 'oracular saying', Lloyd 2003: 26.

[208] Diog. Laert. 8. 59; Philostarat. *Vita Apoll.* 1. 2; Plin. *Hist. Nat.* 30. 1. 9; von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff 1929: 655; cf. Graf 1997: 33–4; Dickie 2001: 32; Todoua 2005: 58–9.

[209] *DK* 31A1; Diog. Laert. 8. 60, 69–70; Suda, s.v. *Empedoclês*; Iambl. *Vita Pyth.* 135, Clement. Alex. *Strom.* 6. 3. 30: Wright 1981: 11–13. Pythagoras and Empedocles are listed by Galen (*De medicina, Proem* 7) as experts in medicine, and by Pliny (*Hist. Nat.* 30. 2. 9) as experts in medicine and magic.

[210] Dodds 1973: 140; Kahn 1960: 33; Flint *et al.* 1999: 118.

[211] Diog. Laert. 8. 77, *DK* 117; cf. on the Pythagorean tradition Burkert 1972: 120–41.

personality attracted so much attention that several versions of his death were disseminated, including the legends of his ascent to the heaven and the leap into the crater of Etna.[212]

Empedocles was considered a disciple of Parmenides, and a follower of Pythagoras.[213] In either case, his early study of philosophy was influenced by a teacher who practised catabasis as a means of acquiring arcane wisdom.[214] It is not surprising therefore that Empedocles refers to his descent into the subterranean world. Diogenes Laertius credits him with reanimation of a woman who had been dead for thirty days; Empedocles himself explained that he healed the sick by retrieving them from the netherworld.[215] The feat of 'bringing back the force of a dead man from Hades' could not be accomplished except through the sorcerer's (*goês*) own descent into the netherworld.[216] If so, Empedocles believed that he had performed the feat of catabasis on multiple occasions, whenever he wished.[217]

Most revealing is a fragment from Empedocles' poem *On the Nature*,[218] describing his vision of the cosmogony:

[212] Diog Laert. 67–73; Kranz 1949: 72–5; Wright 1981: 15–17; esp. Kingsley 1995: 232–316 on the mythological and magical context of the death of fire on Etna.

[213] Diog. Laert. 8. 54, 56; Verdenius 1942: 20, 69; Lloyd 1979: 33; Zuntz 1971: 265; Wright 1981: 5; Burkert 1972: 137; Bremmer 2002: 14; Inwood 2001: 22–33; Trépanier 2004: 125, 129. Barnes (1979: 104) defines this connection as more loose, saying that Empedocles' environment was Pythagorean.

[214] Orphic influence on Empedocles: Kranz 1949: 28; West 1983: 14; 108.

[215] Diog. Laert. 8. 67; *DK* 112.

[216] *DK* 111; cf. Kingsley 1995: 41; Ogden 2001: 118; Todoua 2005: 77–80.

[217] Porphyry cites Empedocles in an obscure context, in which *psuchopompoi dunameis*, 'soul-leading forces' (say?): 'We came under this roofed cave (*antron hupêrephes*)' (*De antro nympharum* 8, *DK* 120; cf. van der Ben 1975: 193–4). It is suggested that Empedocles speaks of entering the underworld, shaped as a cave, and of seeing deaths and other visions there (van der Ben 1975: 193; Ogden 2001: 121; Zuntz 1971: 204, 254). Yet Porphyry quotes this phrase when discussing the cave as the image of the cosmos, and Plotinus (*Enneads* 4. 8. 1. 33) refers to 'Empedocles' cave' in the passage where he compares the soul's liberation from the body to its ascent (*anodos*) from the cave. It is therefore suggested that the cave in this fragment be interpreted as either a symbol of this world (Kranz 1949: 29; Wright 1981: 280, cf. 271; Schibli 1990: 119), or a part of a complex image of the cosmos in its totality, including several realms (Kahn 1960: 20; Kirk *et al.* 1983: 315–16). The Neoplatonic interpretation and its endorsement by modern scholars are criticized by Kingsley (1995: 37–40). Unfortunately, the fragment is detached from its original context and too short to allow a confident interpretation.

[218] Simplicius, *De caelo* 529. 1 (ll. 1–15), *DK* 35.

But I shall turn back again to the path of song I traced before, as I draw off one discourse after another—to that path. When Strife reached the lowest depth of the whirl (*dinê*), and when Love comes to be in the middle of the vortex (*strophalinx*), there it is that all these things come together to be one only, not suddenly, but combining from different directions at will.[219] And as they mingled countless tribes of mortal things poured forth; but many remained unmixed, alternating with those that were being mixed—all those that Strife still held back from above, for it had not all yet retired blamelessly to the furthest limits of the circle, but in some of the limbs it remained while from others it had withdrawn. As much as it was always running ahead in escape, so much was it always pursued by a gentle immortal impulse of blameless Love. Then straightway those things grew mortal that before had learnt to be immortal, and those that were unmixed before became mixed as they exchanged their paths. And as they mingled countless tribes of mortal things poured forth, fitted with forms of all kinds (*pantoiais ideêisin*), a wonder to look upon (*thauma idesthai*).[220] (Translation by G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield.)

Empedocles believed that he actually *saw* how the world emerged, and states this unequivocally: it was 'a wonder to look upon'. In the same line there is another word implying perception by vision: *ideê*, 'look', or 'form'. This repetition is deliberate: elsewhere Empedocles asserts that it is good to say proper things several times.[221] Here, he probably wished to emphasize the awesome appearance of the primeval world.

Empedocles depicts a vortex, and insists on this image, using synonyms, *dinê* and *strophalinx,* both meaning 'whirl, eddy'. The word *dinê* also occurs in the recently published Strasbourg papyrus of the same Empedocles' poem, at the beginning of a long fragment partially overlapping with the passages cited above.[222] The word *dinos*, 'whirling' or 'vortex', appears in another fragment: 'We arrive, I believe, at the profound whirl (*dinos*).'[223] The vortex envisaged by Empedocles consists of various objects combining and mingling and

[219] For different understandings see: Wright 1981: 206–7; Kingsley 2002: 397; Inwood 2001: 54; Trépanier 2004: 190–2.

[220] For other interpretations see: Kirk *et al.* 1983: 296–7; Kingsley 2002: 395–9.

[221] *DK* 25.

[222] Martin and Primavesi 1999: fr. a (ii) 4, cf. van der Ben 1999: 538. *Dinê* and *strophalinx* in the Strasbourg papyrus, Martin and Primavesi 1999: fr. a (ii) 19.

[223] Martin and Primavesi 1999: fr. d 8.

exchanging their paths.[224] This picture of endless rotation of shifting shapes immediately evokes numerous accounts of the mental vortex experienced in altered states of consciousness.[225]

As the second stage of his cosmogony, namely zoogony, Empedocles draws a nightmarish picture: 'Here sprang up many faces without necks, arms wandered without shoulders, the eyes strayed alone, in need of foreheads.'[226] Later these parts begin to merge:

> Many creatures were born with faces and breasts on both sides, man-faced ox-progeny, while others again sprang forth as ox-headed offspring of man, creatures compounded partly of male, partly of the nature of female, and fitted with shadowy parts (*skierois êskêmena guois*).[227] (Translation by G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield.)

These apparitions—Aetius in the sixth century AD called them 'phantom-like', *eidôlophaneis*[228]—are immediately reminiscent of apparitions experienced in the state of trance. Here again, the visualization is extremely vivid. Empedocles' graphic language implies that he actually saw the monstrous ghosts, and discerned some of their limbs, whereas other parts were shadowy.

The vortex and the phantoms are classical examples of mental images appearing during altered states of consciousness. It is clear from their visual intensity that Empedocles' description is not just an intellectual construct or a fantasy.[229] He believes that he had a

[224] Aristotle's criticism of the concept of primeval vortex (*De caelo* B 13, 295 a 29 and elsewhere) exemplifies the contrast between Empedocles' mystic vision and Aristotle's dry rationality. Simplicius has already asserted that Aristotle misunderstood the continuity between phases of Empedocles' cosmogony, and cited the passage under discussion in his argument (Simplicius, *De caelo* 528, 8 cf. Kirk *et al.* 1983: 298), cf. Kingsley's refutation of Aristotle's claim that 'he could say what the earlier philosophers wanted to say better than they could say it themselves' (Kingsley 2002: 356).

[225] See Ch. 1.2.

[226] Arist., *De caelo* 300b30, Simplicius *De caelo* 587. 1. *DK* 57 (tr. G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield).

[227] Aelian, *Nat. anim.* 16. 29, *DK* 61, cf. Kirk *et al.* 1983: 302–5.

[228] Aetius 5. 19. 5, *DK* A72.

[229] And therefore differs from other doctrines assuming rotatory movement at the beginning of the world, as for instance, Anaxagoras' theory that Mind initiated the primeval rotation (*perichôrêsis*, *DK* 59 B12–14). Anaxagoras' extant passages contain a detached and schematic description of this rotation, in dramatic contrast to Empedocles' passionate account of his visions.

revelation,[230] and delights in the magnificent picture he saw: 'a wonder to look upon'.

There is no evidence as to how Empedocles attained his trance. A follower of Parmenides, he may have stayed in the Elean den. He could have learnt from the Pythagoreans the value of caves and underground chambers in the pursuit of the truth.[231] Gregory of Nazianz, a fourth-century AD theologian, even ascribed to him a sojourn in a subterranean adyton.[232] Whatever Empedocles' way to wisdom, the whirling tunnel appeared in his mind as a most powerful image of the primeval world, leading to other mystical visions in which both poems abound.[233]

Empedocles' poems 'put forward a theory which connects an earlier, undifferentiated stage of the universe with a uniting of the elements, recognizing god and mind there, and which further supposes that this divine intelligence still surrounds the cosmos and that the soul in its best state has an affinity with it'.[234] Before this religious cosmology appeared in the form of consistent texts, the theory seems to have undergone three stages, each corresponding to a different state of the author's mind. First it struck Empedocles as a revelatory vision, most probably in a trance-like state. Later, when in a normal waking state of consciousness, he worked it out into a coherent system, following the model suggested by his teacher Parmenides. Finally, he expounded his ideas in verse, inspired by the Muse.[235]

The Muse also guided the poet in his self-imposed censorship: some things were not suitable 'for creatures of the day to hear'. Twice Empedocles urges his disciple to keep the esoteric teaching 'mute in his breast'.[236] C. H. Kahn assumes that 'the partial nature of the

[230] For Empedocles' doctrine as revelation in form, spirit, and content, see Kahn 1960: 8.

[231] It is also suggested that Empedocles used breath control in order to reach out-of-body experiences, Detienne 1963: 80–5.

[232] *Or.* 4. 59.

[233] For Empedocles' mystical poetry as a series of visions see Kahn 1960. Kahn however is reluctant to recognize any traces of ecstatic trance in Empedocles' poetry and legend (Kahn 1960: 33).

[234] Wright 1981: 76.

[235] *DK* 3. For Lucretius, the poetry of Empedocles is the voice of divinely inspired genius (1. 731, 5. 97), cf. Cornford 1952: 64.

[236] *DK* 3, 111, Kahn 1960: 8; Kingsley 2002: 347.

revelation makes one think of a preliminary initiation, which reserves the final disclosure for a later *epopteia*'[237] ('beholding', admittance to the highest mysteries). The initiation entails strict adherence to Empedocles' ideas of purity, and endows the disciple with the superhuman abilities of the teacher.[238] Thus, Empedocles' teaching and Greek mystery cults share a number of basic characteristics: secrecy of the central tenets, gradual admission of the initiate to them, the importance of ritual purity, and most significantly, mystical nature of the doctrine.[239] Empedocles, wonder-worker, philosopher, and poet, left a precious description of his path to the divine wisdom: in trance he saw a vortex which he took for a picture of the birth of the world.

CONCLUSIONS

It is instructive to compare Empedocles' and Parmenides' experience with that of Plotinus, the 'father of Western mysticism'.[240] Although Plotinus lived eight hundred years after them, his exceptional account of his own multiple out-of-body experiences allows fascinating insights into the mental world of early philosophers:

Often I have woken up out of the body to myself, out from all the other things, but inside myself; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identity with the divine (*tôi theiôi eis tauton gegenêmenos*); and set firm in it I have come to that actuality (*energeia*) setting myself above all else in the realm of Intellect (*huper pan to allo noêton emauton hidrusas*). Then after that rest in the divine (*en tôi theiôi stasis*), when I have come down from Intellect to discursive reasoning (*eis logismon ek nou*), I am puzzled how I ever come down, and how my soul has come to be in the body when it is what it has shown itself to be in itself, even when it is in the body.[241] (Translation by A. H. Armstrong, modified.)

[237] Kahn 1960: 8.

[238] Kingsley 1995: 360–3.

[239] Ibid. 367–8; Parker 1995: 499. On elements of 'Orphic–Dionysiac' mysteries (ideas, ritual, and language) in Empedocles' poems see Guthrie 1952: 197; Riedweg 1995. On philosophical doctrines as revealed in mystic initiations see Seaford 2004: 227–9.

[240] Rist 1977: 213.

[241] Plotinus, *Ennead* 4. 8. 1. 1–11.

This powerful description allows a unique glimpse into the mind of a mystic[242] living in the third century AD. The ecstatic experiences which he practised often left him with the sensation of having seen the ultimate beauty.[243] Plotinus felt that he became one with the divine: the beholder and the beheld were united. This ineffable experience, which he called *henosis*, was beyond the ordinary borders of intellect, which acts along the lines of logical reasoning. The joy of this mental state was so overwhelming that Plotinus wondered why his soul returned to the body at all. It is noteworthy that he compared his *henosis* to prophetic possession.[244]

The visions left Plotinus with a sensation of intense beauty—Empedocles too seems to have enjoyed his visions immensely. As a result of his experience, Plotinus 'came to identity with the divine'—while Empedocles' claims to have become divine were not mere boasting, but rather an honest report of his deepest conviction. Parmenides came to perceive the supreme living reality—Plotinus speaks of 'actuality, above all else in the realm of the Intellect'. For both Parmenides and Plotinus, the supreme reality is the One, wholly undifferentiated. The experience itself was ineffable and divinely given, but both Parmenides and Empedocles render their revelations in the rational form of hexameter poems, whereas for Plotinus his out-of-body state is pure Mind, and the return to the body entails return to discursive reasoning. Thus, the noetic insight of each of these thinkers was ecstatic, but *post eventum* it was subjected to rational analysis and expressed in conventional poetic or prosaic form.[245]

Attempts to trace distinctions between the mystical experiences and philosophical doctrines of Pythagoras, Parmenides, and Empedocles are bound to mislead. In F. M. Cornford's words, 'the

[242] Rist 1971: 86; Wallis 1972: 55.

[243] However, on its way to the absolute Plotinus' soul is exalted above the beauty, *Enn.* 6. 9. 9–11.

[244] *Ennead* 5. 3. 14. 9–14. On *henosis* and Plotinus' and Iamblichus' conceptions of soul see Jonas 1971; Blumenthal 1971; Armstrong 1971: 112–29, 213–30; Wallis 1972: 72–82; Dillon 1992: 198–200; Shaw 1998: 109–115, 232–3.

[245] Employment of literary clichés in descriptions of real ecstatic experiences is attested in other cultures, for instance, in Old Testament depictions of apocalyptic visions. The similarity of formulae used in several texts may testify to the existence of a common opinion on the source of prophetic inspiration and the method of its induction (Piñero-Sáenz 1987: 163). For the verbalization of mystical experiences see Moore 1978: 102–5; Streng 1978; Stace 1960: 28–9.

great pre-Socratic thinkers of this type have not, each of them, two distinct visions of the universe—a religious one for Sundays and a scientific for weekdays'.[246] In their pursuit of the ultimate truth, these thinkers preserved the age-old mystic techniques, based on withdrawal into underground chambers and inducing altered states of consciousness, which included visions of vortex.

The meagre preserved evidence on Pythagoras, Parmenides, and Empedocles demonstrates that all of them envisaged the acquisition of wisdom as initiations and claimed not only superhuman wisdom, but also superhuman magical powers. In these two respects they followed the lead of Epimenides,[247] who became a purifier after a long sojourn in a Cretan cave which accommodated initiations into a famous mystery cult. A deep gap separates the primitive medicine man Epimenides from Parmenides, considered by many the founder of philosophy in the modern sense and a precursor of Descartes. Notwithstanding this gap, Epimenides, Parmenides, and their contemporaries still expected to find the ultimate truth exclusively in the divine realm, which could be reached by an ecstatic soul released from the body in the solitude of a cave, a den, or an underground chamber.[248]

[246] Cornford 1952: 109.

[247] The fact intuitively recognized in Pythagoras' life legend.

[248] Aristophanes' *Clouds* makes fun of complex initiation rites required to gain access to the fraternity of wise souls secluded in the *phrontistêrion* (below, Ch. 5.2).

5

Near-Death Experiences, Real and Make-Believe

1. CHASM IN THE MIND

So far, attention has been paid to the cave as a setting which facilitated the attaining of altered states on consciousness. Discussion has also been devoted to visions of awe-inspiring swirls experienced by some sages of the Archaic and early Classical periods. As will be shown below, mental pictures of chasms and tunnels also occurred in accounts of the experiences of a whole group of people, known as *deuteropotmoi* 'those who die twice', or *husteropotmoi*, 'those whose death is postponed'.[1] *Deuteropotmoi* were people who had been pronounced dead, yet returned to their community: either those for whom a tomb was constructed on the assumption that they were dead, or those reported to have died abroad, who reappeared at home.[2] Given the state of medicine and of personal security in the Greek world, *deuteropotmoi* were bizarre and mysterious, but not unique.[3] Democritus even wrote a book entitled *On Hades* about people mistakenly believed to be dead.[4] In the sixth century AD, Proclus, in his *Commentary to Plato's Republic*, cited several examples of people brought to burial, who were resuscitated.[5] At least some rationally inclined authors explained this phenomenon as resulting from temporal deceleration of life processes, caused by wounds or other

[1] Hesych. s.v. *deuteropotmoi*; Ogden 2001: 261.

[2] Plut. *Mor.* 264; Soph. *El.* 62; Garland 1985: 100; cf. above, Ch. 4.1.

[3] Cf. the story of the woman reanimated by Empedocles, above, Ch. 4.4.

[4] The book, which unfortunately has not survived, is mentioned by Proclus, *Comm. in Rep.* 16. 113 (*DK* 68 B1).

[5] Proclus, *In Rem publicam* 16. 114–16.

reasons, the person's soul remaining connected to the body.[6] In any case, the hovering of *deuteropotmoi* between life and death caused general unease, they were considered impure, and had to undergo purification rites symbolizing rebirth in order to rejoin human society.[7]

The marginality of *deuteropotmoi*, especially of those who had been seen to be lifeless, and came back to life, was also the source of their exceptional abilities. The soul liberated from the dead body could finally attain knowledge of the utmost reality, which was impossible for the living, as Socrates argues in the *Phaedo*.[8] Dying prophecies of Patroclus to Hector and Hector to Achilles are classical examples of vatic powers arising on the threshold of death.[9] In the modern world, survivors of near-death experience often feel illuminated and undergo profound personality changes.[10] *Deuteropotmoi* returned to this world endowed with supreme knowledge and vatic gifts, like individuals who had lived through out-of-body experiences. The comparison between the two categories looked natural in antiquity: Proclus equates Er's return to life to the stories of Aristeas, Epimenides, and Hermotimus.[11]

The myth of Er in Plato's *Republic*, which is presented as Socrates' narration of a *deuteropotmos*,[12] closes a discussion of the soul's judgement after death. Er son of Armenias from Pamphylia died in battle; ten days later, when the corpses were conveyed for burial, his body was found to be untouched by decay. Er's body was taken home for burial, and two days later, when placed on the funeral pyre, he came back to life, and recounted what he had seen in the netherworld. In the opening phrases of his story Er says that his soul, 'after it left his body' (*ekbênai*), arrived in a marvellous meadow, where 'there were two chasms next to each other, and opposite them two other (chasms) in the sky'. Between the chasms sat the judges, by

[6] Proclus, *In Rem publicam* 16. 113; Plut. *Mor.* 564D; Detienne 1963: 84.

[7] Plut. *Mor.* 264, Hesych. s.v. *deuteropotmoi*; Johnston 1999: 152, 280.

[8] Plato, *Phaedo* 66 DE; above, Introduction.

[9] Hom. *Il.* 16. 852–4, 22. 356–61; cf. Xen. *Apol.* 30.

[10] Above, Ch. 1.4.

[11] Whom he names Hermodoros, *In Rem publicam* 16. 113, a simple case of confusion to be distinguished from Heraclides' deliberate invention of Empedotimus (cited by Proclus, 6. 119); cf. Bidez 1945: 54. See also Ch. 4.1 above.

[12] *Rep.* 614A–621D; cf. Annas 1981: 349–53; 1982: 129–39; Morgan 2000: 208–10. Cf. Frutiger 1930; Murray 1999 on the nature of Plato's myths.

whose ruling the just ascended to the sky by the opening to the right, and the sinners descended downwards through the opening to the left. Through the other two chasms, souls came down from the sky, or up from the earth. The souls mingled joyfully, the sinners returning from 'the travel under the earth' told of their thousand-year-long sufferings,[13] and the just descending from the sky described pictures of the divine beauty they had enjoyed.[14] Sinners who had committed the most horrible crimes could not repent; the chasm did not open its mouth (*stomion*) for them, and they were hurled into the Tartarus. From these meadows, the souls and Er left for a place where they witnessed the structure of the universe: a pillar of light binding the earth and the sky, with the whirling spindle of Necessity, consisting of shining rotating circles from which emanated music of the spheres.[15] After the souls chose their new incarnations, they drank from the Lethe, forgot their previous lives, and were ejected into the world. Plato was so engaged in the lengthy depiction of the afterlife of souls that he neglected to give any details of Er's return to life.

Psychic immortality is of utmost importance to Plato, and he addresses this subject in three more dialogues, *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, and *Phaedo*.[16] The story of Er is supposed to fire the imagination of the readers by rendering Plato's ideas of afterlife, reward, and punishment in the form of a 'true story', based on the protagonist's own words. This tale is intended to illustrate Plato's conception of true initiation, whose success is dependent on one's worldly achievements rather than just on ritual purity.[17] It is remarkable that Plato's quintessential initiation is straightforwardly pictured as a real journey to the realm of death and back: in fact, every mystery initiation brings the initiate to the threshold of the death.

Er's story is without doubt literary fiction, a modification of Orphic and Pythagorean ideas, which also includes some traditional elements.[18]

[13] Cf. the 10,000-year cycle necessary for ordinary souls in *Phaedr.* 248 E.

[14] Cf. the shining beauty exposed to the initiates to mysteries in *Phaedr.* 240 BC.

[15] For a comparison between the structure of the universe as envisaged in the myth of Er and that of Parmenides see Morrison 1955; Kirk *et al.* 1983: 259.

[16] *Gorg.* 523A–526D; *Phaedo* 113D–114B; *Phaedr.* 248C–249B; cf. Dodds 1959: 372–86; Annas 1982; Kingsley 1995: 104–12; Morgan 1990; 2000: 185–241.

[17] Morgan 1990: 150.

[18] Frutiger 1930: 260–5; Halliwell 1988: 169; Bremmer 2002: 91–2; Boyancé 1966: 99–113; Morgan 1990: 152. Many trace Oriental elements in this myth, e.g. Bidez 1945: 42–52.

The question is whether the image of chasms in Er's vision of the other world originates in Plato's conception of the afterlife, or belongs to the framework of a story by a *deuteropotmos*. Er as a person does not interest Plato, who specifies no more than a single detail concerning Er's own out-of-body experience, the fact that his soul left his body. Plato is intentionally vague about the personality of Er. He is given a strange non-Greek name; his father's name links him with Armenia; he is from Pamphylia, that is, southern Asia Minor, far distant from Armenia; his body is brought from an unspecified battleground to the unnamed home town, which quite surprisingly performs the Athenian traditional rite, exceptional in the Greek world, of burying the war dead at home, rather than on the battlefield; finally, Er had to be buried according to classical Greek practice.[19] This mixture of familiar and foreign features is perhaps intended to give the myth of Er universal sense, and to present his experience as reflecting a truth common to all men.

What really interests Plato in this myth are the ideas of punishment and reward of souls and their immortality, and he invests his creativity in the treatment of these subjects. He employs some traditional images, such as the meadow and the Tartarus, known to Homer and Hesiod,[20] which render the bizarre pictures of the netherworld familiar to his public. Following this logic, details of out-of-body experience should also be recognizable to Plato's audience.

In fact, although Hesiod and Parmenides supplied Plato with precedents for his chasms in the earth,[21] the chasm in the sky is an awkward image. Proclus explicates this image with evident difficulty.[22] For the purposes of his narration Plato could have used another idea, as he did in the *Gorgias*, where Minos, Rhadamanthus, and Aeacus judge the dead in the meadow at the dividing of the road, from which one way leads to the Isles of the Blessed and another to the Tartarus.[23] In Er's vision, the image of the abyss is further developed in the depiction of the incorrigibly wicked: the chasm closes its *stomion* to them, the word *stomion* meaning 'mouth of a cave'. Plato makes the souls of the dead pass through these cave-like one-way chasms several times.

[19] Halliwell 1988: 171.
[20] Meadow: Hom. *Od.* 11, 539, 573, 24. 13; Tartarus: Hes. *Theog.* 119; Hom. *Il.* 8. 13.
[21] Above, Ch. 4.3.
[22] 16. 138–44. [23] 524A; Dodds 1959: 373–5.

In the accounts of modern survivors of near-death experiences, departure from the physical body is very often followed by a flight through a long dark tunnel or corridor, to a mysterious source of light, love, and wisdom.[24] In Plato's account, Er's soul left his body, but did not travel along any tunnel or chasm: he only saw other souls taking this route. Furthermore, many survivors report considerable changes in their outlook, and acquire a new awareness of the world. Er, although insignificant for Plato, returns with the knowledge of the most profound mysteries of the world: he observed the structure of the universe and the fate of immortal souls. Plato's insistence on Er's death, the visions of chasms, and pictures of extraordinary beauty, as well as the presence of guiding beings—all these features of the myth of Er, while certainly not a near-death experience report proper,[25] echo common elements of near-death and out-of-body experiences.

Er's journey to the netherworld is often compared to shamanic flight to other worlds.[26] In fact, near-death experience is an age-old form of shamanic initiation.[27] The reason for this resemblance need not be sought in Plato's adaptation of shamanistic ideas, but instead in the structural similarity of various out-of-body experiences. Plato's models were most probably ordinary Greek *deuteropotmoi*, as well as prominent experts in spiritual voyages, such as Hermotimus and Aristeas.

The case of Cleonymus of Athens, narrated by Aristotle's disciple Clearchus of Soli and cited by Proclus,[28] contains some traditional elements of the soul's journey, such as its separation from the body and the flight over infinitely various places. The mention of passage above the sun may be an allusion to the sight of a dominant light spot known from the accounts of modern near-death survivors and apparently resulting from physiological processes.[29] The apparition of female supernatural creatures (*dunameis*) of inexpressible beauty is reminiscent of the benevolent being reported in almost all these accounts. Another *deuteropotmos* story quoted by Proclus, of Eurynous of Epirus,

[24] See above, Ch. 1.4. [25] Cf. Bremmer 2002: 92.
[26] Morrison 1955. Morrison also compares Er's experience to that of Parmenides.
[27] Above, Ch. 1; Green 2001.
[28] Clearch. fr. 8 Wehrli; Proclus, *In Rem publicam* 6. 114.
[29] Above, Ch. 1.4.

contains no details but the fact of resurrection followed, once again, by a considerable change to Eurynous' lifestyle.

At the end of *On the Delay of the Divine Vengeance* Plutarch tells a story of a *deuteropotmos*.[30] Like Plato, Plutarch is much less interested in this person than in the ethical ideas his biography is supposed to illustrate. Plutarch could have also modelled his narration after earlier compositions treating similar subjects. Plutarch's hero, a man from Soli, who lived a life of villainy, fell from a height, died, revived on the third day during his funeral, and completely changed his way of life. His name was also changed, from Aridaeus to Thespesius. He told his acquaintances about his experiences in the netherworld: his intelligence (*phronoun*) was driven from the body, and his soul opened wide 'as if all of it were an eye'. It saw radiant brightly coloured stars set at vast distances apart. Later he began to see other souls, human in form but slightly different. These details are meaningful, since they resemble authentic near-death experiences: the feeling of being drawn out of the body, enhanced visual perception, a bright spot in a dark void (stars cannot be perceived as stars unless they are seen on a dark background), followed by encounters with various figures.

Then newly baptized Thespesius realized that a part of his soul was left in his body and he was not dead. He was assigned a psychopomp, who guided his soul through the netherworld. Thespesius witnessed the punishment of impure souls, the degree of their sinfulness symbolized by their colour. The emphasis on visual perception, and the definition of the soul's experience as spectacle (*theamata*) indicate that the story follows possibly authentic accounts of out-of-body visions.

After that, Thespesius was taken to a great chasm which had the appearance of a Bacchic grotto; there Dionysus ascended from the netherworld, and the area was called the place of Lethe. Proceeding further, Thespesius arrived at another chasm, which looked from afar like a large crater (mixing-bowl), where several streams flowed together: a whirl. This crater, Thespesius was told, symbolized truthful (white) and deceptive (coloured) dreams: a fascinating association of dreams with the mental vortex. The guide also explains to Thespesius that the whirl is an oracle shared by Night and the Moon; it has no established seat, but wanders throughout humankind in dreams and

[30] *Mor.* 563B–568A.

visions. This remark provides further support for the assumption that the crater is symbolic of the vortex, which has no fixed location, but is generated by the mind and induces visions, which may be easily interpreted as mantic. It would be interesting to know more about this whirl, but Plutarch only says that it was multi-coloured, and that Orpheus arrived there when he descended to Hades.[31]

Then Plutarch moves on to a lengthy discussion of the Delphic rites, which obviously interested him as an expert on Delphi, but could hardly have appeared in visions of a man of Soli in Asia Minor. After additional depictions of chastisements, including the punishment of Thespesius' own father, and a discussion of metempsychosis, Thespesius' soul is described as suddenly pulled as if by a cord, and brought by a strong wind back to his body, which was about to be entombed. Meetings with acquaintances and relatives, as well as the feeling of being pulled back to life by a current against their will, occur consistently in the reports of modern near-death survivors.

Thespesius' story begins and ends with details corresponding to reported elements of the near-death experience. It is significant that this experience has profoundly altered his life: again, deep personality changes are attested to for modern near-death survivors. The spiritual journey described by Plutarch comprises extremely vivid depictions of visual phantoms characteristic of near-death hallucinations, interwoven with lengthy elaborations of mythological and philosophical subjects, based on Orphic, Pythagorean, and other doctrines. Thespesius' vision is not necessarily a realistic account of a revelation of a specific *deuteropotmos*, but even if Plutarch combined in his narration details from various descriptions of such experiences, their basic truthfulness is not compromised.

The dark void, the cave, and the whirl need not have occurred in near-death visions of one and the same person: Plutarch could have borrowed them from several records. These images belong to different parts of Thespesius' experience. The dark space appeared at its beginning, immediately after his intelligence or soul left the body and was on its way to the netherworld, and is accompanied by other straightforward details. The cave and the mixing-bowl belong to the middle, when the soul travelled inside the netherworld, and appear in contexts imbued with

[31] For the crater as an Orphic symbol, see Kingsley 1995: 133–48.

philosophical, mythological, and cultic associations. While the tunnel feeling at the beginning of a near-death experience is common to modern accounts, visions that appear later are individual and more culturally dependent. In Thespesius' case, the dark void looks like an element of an authentic near-death experience, whereas the Bacchic cavern and the crater could derive from at least three sources: reports of near-death experiences, reports of out-of-body experience, or Dionysiac and Orphic imagery inserted into such reports at whatever stage.

Although Plutarch's story shows clear signs of literary treatment, it also contains important structural elements of an authentic near-death experience account. It is likely therefore that in classical antiquity real near-death experiences included the feeling of passing through dark space. As to the images of caves and whirls, Thespesius' case does not constitute unequivocal evidence for their occurrence in near-death visions, which remains probable, but cannot be proved beyond doubt.[32]

Plutarch treats the subject of *deuteropotmoi* in another dialogue, *On the Soul*:[33] a certain Antyllus was told that he had been taken away from the living by mistake, and was revived. Another person died in his stead. In Lucian's *Philopseudes,* a severely ill person was taken to Hades through a great chasm, and sent back to earth by Pluto, who wished somebody else to die.[34] The illness and the flight through the chasm are credible details. Although Lucian's dialogue is far from being historical testimony, these particulars may be used to create a lifelike picture, because they were easily recognizable signs of near-death experience. A similar motif, a death that occurred due to error and resurrection of the dead person, is elaborated by Augustine in *The Care to be Taken for the Dead,*[35] with much moralizing, but no details of the *deuteropotmos*' experience.[36]

We are left with two detailed stories of *deuteropotmoi*, of Er and of Thespesius, both fictitious, but probably modelled on real accounts of out-of-body experiences. Significantly, in the opinion of several experts on near-death experiences, Er's story was based on an account of a return from death.[37] Plutarch's narration contains quite a number of

[32] Cf. Bremmer 2002: 94.
[33] Fr. 3 Dübner = fr. 176 Sandbach, Euseb. *Prep. Ev.* 11. 36.
[34] Luc. *Philops.* 25.
[35] 12. 15.
[36] Bremmer 2002: 97–8.
[37] Gabbard and Twemlow 1984: 142; Blackmore 1993: 9.

ostensibly authentic features of near-death experience, including a flight within a dark void at the beginning of the story. Depictions of chasms by Plato and a cave and a crater by Plutarch cannot be confidently attributed to testimonies on near-death experiences; they may derive from reports of other spiritual journeys, and contain a considerable admixture of mythological and philosophical elaboration.

This would mean that in out-of-body experiences, and most probably specifically in near-death experiences, the Greeks encountered the tunnel passage. No wonder: this visual percept is present in accounts of altered states of consciousness all over the world. Evidence on the occurrence of the tunnel-like sensation in Greece would add an interesting facet to the interpretation of numinosity attributed to real caves: the awe-inspiring 'chasm in the mind' was projected onto actual chasms.

2. MYSTERIES

'Dying to Live'

Mystic initiation may be defined as ersatz-death.[38] Hints scattered through the works of various authors indicate that the aim of the initiate was to attain harmony and bliss by enduring death and learning not to fear it. Apuleius describes his initiation into the mysteries of Isis as 'voluntary death'.[39] Plutarch compares mystery initiations to death, noting the resemblance of the Greek words 'to die' (*teleutan*) and 'to be initiated' (*teleisthai*), and alleges that, at the moment of death, the soul suffers (*paskhei*) something similar to the act of being initiated.[40] The deeper the feeling of death, the greater was the blessing.[41]

[38] The title of this section is that of the book by S. Blackmore (1993).

[39] *Met.* 11. 21.

[40] *De anima* fr. 6 Dübner; fr. 178 Sandbach, Stobaeus, *Anthologion* 4. 52. 49.

[41] K. Clinton calls attention to a gnostic treatise referring to the Eleusinian practice of proceeding from the Lesser to the Greater mysteries and quoted by Hippolitus (*Refut.* 5. 8. 42–4). The gnostic commentator cites Heraclitus' phrase 'Greater deaths obtain greater shares' (B 25 *DK*) and clarifies its relevance to the Greater mysteries: 'Those who obtained deaths there [i.e. at the Greater Mysteries] obtain greater shares' (Clinton 1992: 86).

Plutarch continues his reflections with observations on 'the great mysteries', probably a reference to the Eleusinian mysteries:[42]

> At first there was wandering, and wearisome roaming, and some fearful journeys through unending darkness (*dia skotous hupoptoi poreiai kai atelestoi*), and just before the end (*telos*), every sort of terror, shuddering and trembling and sweat and amazement. Out of these emerges marvellous light (*phôs ti thaumasion*), and pure places and meadows follow after,[43] with voices and dances and solemnities of sacred utterances and holy visions (*phasmata hagia*). Among these the completely initiated (*mustês*) walks freely and without restraint; crowned, he takes part in rites, and joins with pure and pious people; he observes the crowd of people living at this very time uninitiated and unpurified, who are driven together and trample each other in deep mud and darkness, and continue in their fear of death, their evils and their disbelief in the good things in the other world. Then in accordance with nature the soul stays engaged with the body in close union thereafter.

If one had tried to think up a description of mystic experience as close to near-death experience as possible, it is hard to imagine a more apt and vivid account. A long flight through the darkness, with a marvellous light in its end, as well as all kinds of visions, happiness, and meetings with kindly people—what could be closer to the paradigm near-death experience discussed in Chapter 1? The central event in mystery initiation involved the tunnel sensation, and its account by Plutarch is both coherent and unequivocal.

Mysteries were secret cults that were intended to bestow happiness in this world and a better life in the hereafter on their adherents, usually called *mustai*. They emerged to a large extent as an alternative to the prevailing belief in grim post-existence of the soul beneath the earth as a shadow deprived of consciousness and will, as in the chilling picture painted by Homer in the eleventh song of the *Odyssey*. Several mystery cults are known to have existed by the sixth century (or perhaps earlier), such as the Eleusinian mysteries, celebrated in Eleusis in Attica and dedicated to Demeter, the mysteries of Cabiri, conducted on the island of Samothrace, and the Dionysian mysteries, which could be performed everywhere. There is firm

[42] Eleusinian mysteries: Meyer 1987: 8; similarity between mystic initiation and near-death experiences: Seaford 2006: 53; Bonnechere 2003: 214–15.

[43] For the meadows of the Bacchic gold leaves, land of the pious, and Elysian fields see Cole 2003: 212.

evidence for the existence in the subsequent period of many lesser mysteries, some of them of local importance, others renowned throughout the Greek world.[44] The basic characteristics of the mystery cults remained constant throughout the many centuries of their history, modifications of ritual notwithstanding. Even the mystery cults of the Egyptian Isis and of the Persian Mithras, extremely popular in the Roman world, seem to have been modelled on the Greek tradition.[45] In the course of the central ceremony of initiation into a mystery cult, known as *teletê*, a great secret was imparted to the *mustai*. Those who experienced the revelation reformed their earthly lives and attained salvation after the death. All the details of the eye-opening life-changing disclosure of the ultimate secret are ineffable.[46]

At the end of the passage cited above Plutarch restates the ancient idea which found early expression in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*,[47] and reiterated by Plato in *Phaedo*: those who arrive in Hades uninitiated will wallow in the mud, while those initiated (into the Eleusinian mysteries) will dwell with the gods.[48] The same notion is repeated time and again in the texts inscribed on gold tablets which accompanied *mustai*, Dionysiac or Orphic, to the grave and were believed to guide their souls on their last journeys.[49] The change in the *mustês*'s destiny underwent so dramatic a change that it could be perceived as an apotheosis: 'Once human, you have become a god' is the inscription on one of the gold tablets.[50] Empedocles, the extravagant sage who claimed that the knowledge of gods' secrets had

[44] Burkert 1987; Scarpi 2002; Cosmopoulos 2003; Bianchi 2004.

[45] Burkert 1987: 2; Burkert 2002; Clinton 1992: 131; Dunand 2000: 131. J. Assmann expresses this idea most emphatically: 'The "Egyptian mysteries"... were invented by the Greeks' (Assmann 2002: 59). For an analysis of Roman mystery cults based on cognitive theory see Gragg 2004. Some of D. L. Gragg's insights (esp. the idea that mysteries, being special-agent rituals, were characterized by high levels of sensory pageantry) are applicable to Greek mysteries as well.

[46] Sources: Scarpi 2002: i. 180–207, 317–29, 413–21, with comm.; cf. Burkert 1987: 9.

[47] 480–2, cf. Sophocles fr. 837 Radt, Isoc. 4. 28; Pind. Fr. 137 Maehler; other sources: Scarpi 2002: i. 207–19, with comm.; Cole 2003: 194; Bianchi 2004: 264–5.

[48] Plato, *Phaedo* 69C; cf. Clinton 1992: 85.

[49] Sources: Scarpi 2002: 329–33, 421–9; cf. Zuntz 1971: 277–393; Cole 1980; 2003: 207–8; Graf and Johnston 2007. Identification of the mysteries associated with the gold tablets is controversial: Price 1999: 119–21. Salvation promised to those initiated into the Isiac mysteries: Dunand 2000: 138–40.

[50] *IG* xiv. 642, cf. 641. 1; Graf and Johnston 2007: 8–9, 12–13; Zuntz 1971: 301, 329; Cole 2003: 207.

rendered him divine,[51] was not alone: other mortals were confident of their renewal and rebirth as immortals, thanks to initiation rites. Initiation transformed the initiate's personality through changing his attitude to life and death.

Here once again, it is illuminating to return to the accounts of modern near-death experiences. In many cases their impact on the survivors amounts to overall personality change. Pagan mysteries apparently had a similar impact, at least on those initiates who sincerely believed in the efficacy of the ritual.

From darkness to light

The focus of various mysteries was revelation of the hidden truth: the direct encounter with the divine imparted exclusive knowledge which elevated the initiate to his new blessed state.[52] In this respect mystic initiations resemble the experience of seers, sages, and enquirers in some oracular cults. However, the essential difference between the experiences was that, in mystery cults, the secret was revealed to the initiate by another person or persons, whereas the vision of a prophet or a sage came from within his own mind, and remained his personal knowledge until communicated to the public. The initiate however was neither an observer nor a conscious learner: his state of mind was an important precondition for achieving a sense of contact with the divine. In fact, Aristotle emphasizes that the purpose of initiations into mysteries is not to learn (*ou mathein*), but rather to experience (*pathein*), and to be inducted to a certain state of mind (*diatethênai*).[53] To produce the desirable effect on the initiates, these experiences had to be perceived by them as authentic; in order for trivial events to be perceived by the *mustai* as ineffable revelations, they had to be brought to a state of heightened sensitivity and perhaps also suggestibility.

It is not surprising therefore that some cultic centres feature both oracular and mystery aspects. At Claros, during the first and the

[51] Above, Ch. 4.4.

[52] Cole 1980: 233; Burkert 1987: 90.

[53] Fr. 15 Rose, preserved in Synesios (*Dion.* 10), cf. Meyer 1987: 12; Burkert 1987: 69; Schefer 2000: 60.

second centuries AD many consulters of the oracle performed initiations, allowing them to descend into the inner chambers of the sanctuary.[54] Mystery ceremonies were associated with the oracle of Trophonius from Classical times.[55] At Acharaca, mystery initiations were performed in a cave that served as a *iatromanteion*.[56]

Darkness was an important element of initiation ceremonies. In several cults, the *mustês* was blindfolded at the beginning of the ceremony, the veil removed only towards the culmination of the rite, presumably when the initiate was ready to witness the awesome sight. The contrast between sightlessness and sight was apparently reflected in the terminology of the mystery cults. *Mustês* is derived from the verb *muein*, 'to close (the lips or the eyes)'.[57] Evidence from several mystery cults demonstrates that the practice of blindfolding initiates was common.[58] Moreover, in the Eleusinian and the Samothracian mysteries *mustês* contrasts with *epoptês,* 'beholder', the two terms designating respectively the first-time and second-time participants in the rites: during the primary stage of initiation, the *mustês* remained in darkness. In Plato's *Symposium* Diotima the wise Mantinean woman juxtaposes *muêsis* as the initial stage of the search for supreme wisdom and *epoptika* as the ultimate stage.[59] Thus, the first stage of initiation is characterized by ritual blindness, while the subsequent stage is focused on sight.[60]

Various degrees of spiritual enlightenment were intrinsically connected with darkness and light. In the Eleusinian mysteries, the central ceremony was illuminated by the sacred light, in striking

[54] Above, Ch. 2.4.

[55] Bonnechere 1998; 2003: 131–217; 2006. On Trophonius see above, Ch. 2.3.

[56] Above, Ch. 2.2.

[57] Scarpi 2002: i, p. xvii. The initiates had to keep their silence with the uninitiated about the sacred rites they had seen, and hence the word *mustês* is interpreted by some as indicating the prohibition on divulging the secrets, e.g. Meyer 1987: 4; Cole 2003: 193.

[58] Veiled initiates: Eleusinian, Bianchi 1976: 47, 49; the Lovatelli urn, Burkert 1987: figs. 2–4; Bianchi 1976: 50; Clinton 1992: 86; 1993: 118; in the mysteries of Cabiri at Thebes, Schachter 1981–94: ii. 101; Bacchic, Roman terracotta reliefs, Kerényi 1976: fig. 135; Burkert 1987: fig. 6; Bianchi 1976: figs. 84–6; Mithraic: Merkelbach 1984: figs. 29, 30; Vermaseren 1956: no. 189; Campbell 1968: 296, 298.

[59] 210A; Morgan 1990: 86–9; Seaford 2004: 235.

[60] Dowden 1980: 414; Lehmann 1969: ii. 14–15; Burkert 1983: 268, 275; Cole 1984: 26–36; Clinton 1992: 86; 2003: 50; Schefer 2000: 67, 71–3.

contrast to the preceding darkness.[61] A recently published epitaph of a person who was initiated into the Samothracian mysteries mentions 'the sacred light of the two Kabiroi', thus attesting to the existence on Samothrace of a ritual similar to that of Eleusis.[62] Euripides' *Bacchae*, which is infused with mystery symbolism, contains allusions to sacred darkness and blessed light.[63] In the passage cited above Plutarch stresses the physical and symbolic transition from darkness to light; 'darkness and light appearing in sudden changes' are listed by Dio Chrysostom as part of mystic initiation.[64]

In the mysteries, darkness was not merely symbolic: K. Clinton observes that 'the loss of sight, seeing only darkness in a kind of death, was like an experience of the Underworld'.[65] The sudden emergence from the complete darkness of torch-bearing figures must have had an astonishing impact on the initiate. Seeing the sacred symbols, even if they were in fact most trivial objects, could then be perceived as a life-changing experience.[66]

Several points discussed in Chapter 1 are relevant here. It has been shown that, even in slightly altered states of consciousness, every detail of one's surroundings may take on incredible beauty and acquire supreme significance. Such states can be induced by various techniques, among them fasting, exhaustion, fear, pain, sensory deprivation, rhythmic noises and uproar, attested to in descriptions of Greek mysteries.[67] In altered states of consciousness, normal language abilities are often inhibited. The feeling of ineffability accompanying mystic revelations may be one of the important reasons why they were shrouded in secrecy. The great mystery would appear unimportant or even ridiculous to people in a normal state of mind; moreover, the experience itself, having been undergone in an altered state of consciousness, could

[61] For the importance of alternation between light and darkness in the Eleusinian mysteries, see Burkert 1983: 277–8; Parisinou 2000: 68–71; Schefer 2000: 50–1, 67.

[62] Karadima-Matsa and Dimitrova 2003.

[63] Ll. 608–9 and 486; Versnel 1990: 169; Seaford 1981: 256; 2006: 52–3; Schefer 2000: 70.

[64] *Or.* 12. 33.

[65] Clinton 1992: 86, cf. Seaford 1981: 261; Burkert 1983: 280; Schefer 2000: 53, 65–6.

[66] For the epiphany at the culmination of the Eleusinian rites see Burkert 1983: 286–8.

[67] Uproar and noise: Clinton 2003: 64; fasting: Burkert 1987: 77; flagellation and pain: Burkert 1987: 102–4; exhaustion: below in this chapter.

not be communicated in words, hence its transcendental contents were bound to remain ineffable. Another important feature of altered states of consciousness is the feeling of rejuvenation or rebirth reported by some modern experiencers. This feeling is strongly evident in the ideology of mystery cults, as well as in the subjective sensations of *mustai*. Finally, some initiates could attain the supreme bliss of feeling at one with the deity they worshipped.

The journey through darkness to light is a component of various ecstatic experiences. Comparisons between mystery initiations and death[68] may suggest that the darkness–light transition as part of the practice leading to spiritual renewal may have been chosen by individuals who had lived through an introverted mystic experience and sought a way to impart their knowledge to other people.

Caves as mise-en-scènes *for mystery cults*

Mystery initiations habitually took place in dark, in some cases underground, places. Porphyry reports this practice in his *On the Cave of the Nymphs*.[69] In the reflection on initiation ceremonies of Dio Chrysostom, 'a mystical recess' (*mustikos muchos*) is presented as an obvious and necessary part of the environment, where the initiate 'hears many mystic voices and sees many mystic sights while light and darkness appear to him alternately'.[70] There, according to Dio, everyone, even the brute barbarians, assume (*huponoêsai*) that a wise insight and plan exist in the world—we would say that they experience a noetic sensation of contact with the divine.

Eleusis

The Athenian Dio Chrysostom most probably had the Eleusinian mysteries in mind. In fact, at Eleusis, the main ceremony, conducted in complete darkness, was focused on the structure in the centre of the initiation hall, *telesterion*. This structure is described as *muchos* in

[68] Couloubaritsis 1994: 73; Seaford 2005; 2006: 76–86.
[69] *De antro* 6.
[70] Dio. Chrys. *Or.* 12. 33; cf. Clinton 2003: 63; Burkert 1987: 89; 1993: 185; Bérard 1974: 97. On the word *muchos* see above, Ch. 2.5.

the paean to Dionysus by fourth-century Philodamus;[71] it was from this place that the light shone forth at the culmination of the mysteries.[72] The effect of the awe-inspiring environment was enhanced by the two days of fasting and the exhausting march of more than 30 kilometres from Athens to Eleusis.[73]

One of the most evocative features of the topography of the Eleusinian sanctuary was a cave sacred presumably to Pluto, not mentioned in the literary tradition but identified by several dedications.[74] This cave, with a small temple built at its opening, was the first landmark the initiates saw when they entered the sanctuary.[75] The temple was established in the sixth century, and restructured in the fourth century. The site was obviously chosen as reminiscent of the chasm in the earth (*chasma gês*), through which Persephone was abducted by Pluto.[76] People standing on the Sacred Way to the Hall of the Mysteries (*telesterion*) were able to see the upper part of the cavern and the facade of the temple. The cave consisted of two chambers: the larger one housed the temple, and the smaller one had an aperture through which it was possible to pass to the outside. This complex probably served as the setting for a part of the sacred drama of the annual return of Persephone.[77] The ritual was perhaps staged as a search for the goddess, which culminated in her discovery, symbolized by the miraculous appearance of the sacred sign, presumably the ear of corn, in the *telesterion*.[78]

[71] Furley and Bremer 2001: no. 2.5, 29; Scarpi 2002: i. 130.

[72] Schol. in Aristoph. *Ran.* 340–3; Plut. *Mor.* 81DE; Clinton 1992: 85, 89. The initiation hall is usually called *anaktoron* in the ancient sources; the central structure is often dubbed *anaktoron* in modern publications, but its actual name is still being debated (Burkert 1983: 276; Clinton 1992: 126–32; 1993: 123 n. 47).

[73] Clem. Alex. *Protrept.* 21. 2. Consumption of psychotropic substances has also been assumed. It is suggested that *kukeôn*, the sacred beverage drunk in the course of the Eleusinian ceremonies, was prepared from barley contaminated with ergot, the common grain fungus and toxic infectant of flour, containing potent hallucinogenic alkaloids similar to LSD (Wasson *et al.* 1998). A case has been made for the use of opium and poppy juice (Burkert 1983: 281), but the question remains where the quantities of ergot-infested grain or opium, necessary for thousands of initiates, were procured. For criticism of both suggestions see Burkert 1987: 108–9.

[74] *IG* ii^{2} 2047, 2048, 4701; Burkert 1987: 91, 95; Dietrich 1990: 173.

[75] Mylonas 1961: 99, 146–9; figs. 2, 3, 4, no. 20, fig. 50; Wickens 1986: ii. 279–87. K. Clinton identifies the cave as the Mirthless Rock, the spot where Demeter sat in her grief: Clinton 1992: 17–27.

[76] The Orphic hymn to Pluton refers to the cavern in Eleusis as the gates to Hades, Kern 1922: 115, fr. XVIII. 14–15; Mylonas 1961: 100; Clinton 1992: 22.

[77] Mylonas 1961: 149; Clinton 1992: 87; 2003: 67; Scarpi 2002: i. 491, 517.

[78] Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 35–6. The Eleusinian *telesterion* as the mystery-religion correlative of Plutarch's holy meadows: ibid. 33.

Thus, at Eleusis the functions fulfilled by a murky cavern seem to have been divided between two locales: the relatively small natural cave symbolized the passage to the netherworld, while the dark hall which provided room for the hundreds of initiates served as the setting for the main revelation, associated with the structure called 'nook' (*muchos*).[79]

Dionysiac and Orphic mysteries

Dionysiac mystery initiations were frequently held in subterranean vaults.[80] Caves were prominent in the Dionysiac imagery and mythology. Dionysus, who according to myths, spent his childhood in a cave, was first depicted inside caverns in the sixth century, when he was shown hidden in a grotto on Cypselus' chest.[81] The cave of Dionysus on Euboea was said to have sheltered the Argives on their way from Troy; and from this cave they brought home an ancient image of the god.[82] During festivities organized by Ptolemy Philadelphus, a spectacular three-dimensional Bacchic cave was displayed in a procession.[83]

There is archaeological evidence attesting to the importance of caves, natural and artificial, in the Greek cult of Dionysus and the Roman cult of Bacchus. A cave dedicated to Dionysus and the Nymphs at Aphytis in

[79] Demeter's precincts elsewhere feature natural and artificial caverns (Nilsson 1961–7: i. 463; Dietrich 1986: 36–7). In Arcadia, Demeter had a sacred cave near Phigalia. According to the local legend, the goddess shut herself up there, grieving the rape of Persephone (Paus. 8. 42. 1–4). The sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone in Acragas comprised two caverns (Parisinou 2000: 149), the temple of Demeter in Cnidos had a crypt (Hellmann 1992: 260), Demeter's sanctuary in Selinus featured an underground vaulted megaron (White 1967), and on Thera dedications to Demeter were discovered inside a cave (*IG* xii. 3. 418, Kose 1997: 74). The function of these underground chambers (entrance to Hades and hall of initiations have been suggested) remains obscure. D. Ogden compares Demeter's underground megara with Pythagoras' subterranean chamber where he met 'The Mother', supposedly Demeter (Ogden 2001: 120, 125; above, Ch. 4.2).

[80] Boyancé 1961; Burkert 1987: 101; Merkelbach 1988: 63–6; Scarpi 2002: i. 602–3 (comm. to D1–3); Jaccottet 2003: 150–62.

[81] Paus. 5. 19. 6; cf. *H. Dion.* 25. 5–6; Paus. 3. 24. 5; Apoll. Rhod. 2. 907–8; Diod. Sic. 3. 69–70; Philostr. *Imag.* 13 (Semele); Nilsson 1957: 62; Boyancé 1961: 108–10; Jeanmaire 1970: 342, 350; Lavagne 1988: 48; Scarpi 2002: i. 603; Jaccottet 2003: i. 156.

[82] Paus. 2. 23. 1.

[83] Athen. 5. 200C; cf. 4. 148B on artificial Bacchic grottoes furnished for Mark Antony in Athens; Nilsson 1957: 61; Jeanmaire 1970: 365–6; Lavagne 1988: 91–9.

the Pallene peninsula attracted dedications from the Archaic age.[84] Attic fourth-century votive reliefs and vases show the infant Dionysus in the company of the Nymphs within arched caves.[85] Epigraphic evidence testifies to the association of the cult of Dionysus with caves all over the Mediterranean. In Philodamus' fourth-century paean to Dionysus, the god commands that a grotto (*antron*) be furnished for him in Delphi.[86]

A series of Roman reliefs and sarcophagi depict Dionysus inside or next to grottoes.[87] In Orange (Roman Arausio), a sanctuary of Bacchus included a subterranean vault.[88] A temple of Liber Pater in Mactar near Carthage also featured a crypt.[89] In Lyon (Roman Lugdunum) there were at least two artificial grottoes, both associated with Dionysus. The earlier and smaller grotto, predating Hadrian's epoch, was directly accessible from the theatre sacred to Dionysus–Bacchus. A larger grotto was constructed 16 m away from it during the Severan period; it yielded fragmentary statues of a Nymph, a Satyr, and a nude boy.[90]

Caves and man-made grottoes played an essential role in the mystery cult of Dionysus. A number of Attic vases feature Dionysiac caverns, depicted in minute detail, from surrounding rock landscapes and rich vegetation, to statues of the god: these caverns served as *mise-en-scènes* for *anodoi*, emergence of various personages from beneath the earth.[91] Some of these scenes probably suggest theophanies,[92] thereby establishing a link between cave environment and mystic visions. In several papyrus fragments of Attic tragedies Dionysiac *mustai* are represented inside caves.[93]

[84] Larson 2001: 239.

[85] Edwards 1985: 61, nos. 14 and 15; on a pelike by the Eleusinian painter an ivy-clad cave is in the background of a scene depicting the infant Dionysus received by Hermes from a female deity, Parisinou 2000: 51; Jaccottet 2003: i. 156–7.

[86] Furley and Bremer 2001: no. 2.5, 140; Lavagne 1988: 87.

[87] Merkelbach 1988: 64, 66, ills. 44, 67.

[88] Picard 1958: 84–92. Its function is still under discussion: Lavagne 1986: 144.

[89] Lézine 1961: 150–2; Picard 1958: 85; Boyancé 1961: 119–20; Seaford 2006: 82.

[90] Audin 1973. The quality of masonry and the amount of work invested in the construction of these grottoes suggest that they were used for cultic purposes, as convincingly demonstrated by Audin, rather than as a storage rooms, as argued by Lavagne (1986: 144).

[91] Edwards 1985: 61; Bérard 1974: figs. 10, 34, 35; Merkelbach 1988: 64–5.

[92] Bérard 1974: 58, 103.

[93] Kramer 1979 = Kannicht *et al.* 1971–2004: no. 646a; Merkelbach 1988: 64.

Caves appear in Roman art and literature in initiatory contexts. Plutarch's description of a spiritual journey to the netherworld includes a Bacchic grotto.[94] On a fragment of a Roman relief, the lower register features three nude youths, one of them leading the other two, as well as a Bacchic rod and a phallic statue in the background. In the upper register, a cave is depicted, with a female figure inside holding a mask, and a child with an object resembling a book scroll in front of her.[95] The nudity of the youths suggests initiations, while the boy with the book and the semi-nude woman are reminiscent of the frescos in the Villa of Mysteries in Pompeii.

Against this background, Livy's statement that the Bacchic rites prohibited by the Roman Senate in 186 took place in 'hidden caves' (*in abditos specus*) seems to be a trustworthy report of the actual situation.[96] Furthermore, the hidden caves did not merely serve as a background for the ceremonies, but fulfilled an essential function: Livy's account of the sacrificial killing of initiates and their disappearance into the subterranean caves attests perhaps to a ritual of catabasis, enactment of a mock death which was an integral part of the initiations.[97]

Mustai and a cavern (*antron*) are mentioned together in several inscriptions from various places. 'Guardians of the cave', *antrophulakes*, are referred to in the lengthy inscription left by Dionysiac *mustai* from Torre Nova.[98] An 'evergreen beautiful cavern' (*aeithales antron*), along with a fountain, a building (*oikos*) to house the sacred rites, and an altar, constituted a sanctuary dedicated by Timocleides to Dionysus Baccheus 'for the benefit of the initiates' on Thasos.[99]

[94] Above, Ch. 5.1.

[95] Freyburger-Galland *et al.* 1986: pl. IV. Freyburger-Galland *et al.* 1986: 114, 127 and in the caption to the illustration, suggest that the scene represents an Orphic initiation, mainly because they interpret the mask as Orpheus' prophesying head. The head, portraying a bearded man, resembles rather a Satyr's mask, and a semi-nude female figure would be out of place in an oracular scene. The phallic figure and the thyrsus also suggest a Bacchic context.

[96] 39. 13.13; cf. Macrob. *Sat.*1. 18. 3; Boyancé 1961: 119; Bérard 1974: 108; Lavagne 1988: 89, 174–80; Freyburger-Galland *et al.* 1986: 171–96.

[97] Seaford 1981: 262; Freyburger-Galland *et al.* 1986: 198–9.

[98] Cumont 1933: 258–60; Nilsson 1957: 61–2; Jaccottet 2003: no. 188, i. 30–53, esp. 44.

[99] An unpublished inscription, translation: Roux 1970–2: ii. 633–4 (indicating 3rd cent. BC as its date); Jaccottet 2003: no. 31 (citing as the date 1st cent. AD); Merkelbach 1988: 19; discussion: Jaccottet 2003: i. 155–9; Scarpi 2002: i. 603.

Callatis on the Thracian coast has yielded eight inscriptions set up by a Dionysiac *thiasos* during at least three centuries of its existence, grottoes are mentioned in three of them. A third-century decree refers to a subterranean grotto, *psalis*, a first-century BC document attests to the dedication of a cave (*antron*) to Dionysus and the members of a cult association (*thiasos*), whereas a first-century AD inscription stipulates that the ex-voto be placed in a 'recess'—*muchos*.[100] The Dionysiac cave in Callatis was most probably an artificial grotto, modelled on contemporary vaulted tombs.[101] The term *neobacchoi*, designating newly initiated Dionysiac *mustai*, which occurs in a Dionysiac inscription from Callatis, as well as the celebration of trieteric festival by the *thiasos*, indicate that the activities of the *thiasos* included mystery initiations.[102] The funerary symbolism of the Callatis grotto emphasizes the connection of the Dionysiac initiations with death, both real and ersatz, staged inside the vault.[103]

The number of epigraphic testimonies to the use of caverns in the Bacchic rites would be considerably greater if Hesychius' definition of constructions called megara as underground dwellings proved to be universally applicable.[104] In fact, an altar from Thessalonica was dedicated by a person who bore three titles, 'father of the cave' (*patêr spêlleou*), 'head of the megaron' (*arkhimageireus*), and 'head of temple administration' (*arkhineôkoros*).[105] Furthermore, the association of the megaron with the mystery cult of Dionysus is confirmed by an inscription from Abdera commemorating the dedication of a megaron to Dionysus and *sunmustai*.[106] However, the nature of the *megara* mentioned in several other documents left by worshippers of Dionysus remains uncertain: they may have been overground

[100] *ISM* iii. 35, 80, 44; Pippidi 1964; Boyancé 1961: 117; Jaccottet 2003: i. 151–5, nos. 54, 58, 61.

[101] A. Avram, comm. to *ISM* iii. 35; Jaccottet 2003: i. 153; comm. to no. 54.

[102] *ISM* iii. 47; Jaccottet 2003: 154–5.

[103] Jaccottet 2003: i. 137; Seaford 2006: 67.

[104] Hesych. s.v. megara: 'some call thus underground dwellings, and pits (*hoi men tas katôgeious oikêseis, kai barathra*), house, and dwelling-place of gods, others—roofed dwellings, or city.'

[105] *IG* x. 2. 1. 65; Cumont 1933: 259; Boyancé 1961: 118; Pippidi 1964: 156; Nilsson 1961–7: ii. 363; Jaccottet 2003: no. 22.

[106] Bousquet 1938; Jaccottet 2003: no. 35, cf. no. 49; Scarpi 2002: i. 604.

constructions, and not necessarily crypts.[107] In any case, catabasis into caverns, natural or artificial, was common in the cult of Dionysus in its diverse forms, including ecstatic and mystery rites.

Caverns and dark spaces were prominent in the Dionysiac mysteries and in the Eleusinian cult as symbols connecting mortal initiates with landmarks in the biographies of the gods. It is suggested that in the Dionysiac initiations caves were used to simulate the underworld and thus emphasize the *mustês*'s experiences of death and subsequent rebirth.[108] The function of the caves, in terms of their physical impact on the mind of the initiates, was either to enhance the effect of normal vision of outer surroundings, or to induce an altered state of consciousness. Dramatic transition from darkness to light, from being blinded to seeing great sights, was intended to alter the initiate's worldview.[109]

Our notion of Orphism demands constant reassessment, given the ever-growing number of new testimonies. The current view is that Orphism appears to have been closely associated with the Bacchic mysteries.[110] Herodotus already juxtaposes Bacchic and Orphic rites;[111] Dionysus appears together with *Orphikoi*, presumably the Orphic initiates, on the ivory tablets from Olbia on the Black Sea coast.[112] The word *mustai* and references to initiations (*teletai*) occur in Orphic contexts on multiple occasions, notably in the Derveni papyrus and on some gold leaves, for instance those from Hipponion and from Pherae.[113] Plato ridiculed *Orpheotelestai*, 'Orpheus-initiators'

[107] As suggested by Boyancé 1961: 118; Pippidi 1964: 156; Nilsson 1961–7: ii. 363; Nilsson 1957: 62; Scarpi 2002: i. 603. See Jost 2003: 150 opposing the interpretation of Dionysus' megaron near Mantinea (Paus. 8. 6. 5) as an artificial grotto. The excavated megaron of Despoina at Lykosoura was an enclosure protected from public view, but contained no crypts (Jost 2003: 148–9). For a discussion of megara see Dietrich 1973; Condoléon-Bolanacchi 1992–8; Hellmann 1992: 259–60.

[108] Jaccottet 2003: i. 154; Seaford 1981: 262; 2006: 67.

[109] Dionysiac rites, and mystery initiations in particular, were often performed at night: Paus. 1. 40. 6, 2. 37. 6; Eurip. Bacch. 485; Heracl. *DK* 22 fr. B14; Plut. *Mor.* 291A; *LSAM* 26; cf. Scarpi 2002: i. 598–9.

[110] Graf 1993; Bremmer 2002: 24; Burkert 1998: 393–4; Parker 1995: 484–5, 495–7; Morard 2001: 140–1: Bianchi 2004: 274; Graf and Johnston 2007: *passim*, esp. 121, 142–3.

[111] 2. 81; Linforth 1941: 38–50; West 1983: 16.

[112] Vinogradov 1991, repr. in Vinogradov 1997: 242–9; cf. West 1983: 17–18; Burkert 1987: 46; Zhmud 1992; Graf 1993: 240; Parker 1995: 485; Morard 2001: 225. For later texts where *Orphikoi* are mentioned, see Linforth 1941: 276–89.

[113] *SEG* 45. 646; Tsantsanoglou 1997; Bremmer 2002: 15–16; West 1997*b*: 84.

who wandered from city to city offering purifications and promising release both in this life and after death: their congregations could not be but temporary.[114] However, the Olbian tablets suggest the existence of permanent cult groups whose doctrines were focused on Orpheus and based on the pseudonymous literature associated with his name.[115] The particular way of life of the Orphics, known as *orphikos bios*,[116] and most notably their vegetarianism, could not but isolate them from society and public life where animal sacrifices and consumption of meat were the norm.

In the Orphic theogonies, the cave of Night houses several events of paramount importance: there the first-born demiurge god Phanes had his seat, and later Zeus was born and brought up there, and learnt his destiny from the Night's oracle.[117] Orphic poems entitled *Catabasis (Descent to Hades)* were known by the fourth century at the latest, and probably derive from Archaic hexametrical narrations. Although their exact contents remain unknown, they apparently focus on visits to the netherworld of Orpheus or other figures, experiences which supposedly endowed them with supernatural knowledge.[118] Given that Orphic poems are likely to have been composed for ritual use,[119] poems on catabasis may hint at underground descents of the initiates. Orpheus himself was said to have been initiated by the Dactyls, dwellers in the Idaean cave.[120] Regrettably, Orphic initiation rites are known in even less detail than the Dionysiac mysteries.

[114] *Rep.* 364E; cf. Theophr. *Char.* 16. 11–12; Linforth 1941: 170; Boyancé 1937: 11–15; Guthrie 1952: 203.

[115] Parker 1995: 485; Graf and Johnston 2007: 163–4.

[116] Plato, *Leg.* 782E.

[117] Kern 1922: frs. 104, 105; West 1983: 71–2, 213–14. The prophetic adyton of Night appears also in col. 11 of the Derveni papyrus, Betegh 2004: 24; 153–4; Funghi 1997: 27. See also above, Ch. 4.3.

[118] Fr. 293–6 Kern; Linforth 1941: 110–19; Gantz 1993: 724; Bremmer 2002: 144 n. 87; Turcan 1956: 136–7; Johnston 1999: 114; Graf and Johnston 2007: 173–4. A fragmented papyrus text of a (2nd–3rd cent. AD?) Orphic catabasis: Turcan 1956; Lloyd-Jones and Parsons 1978; Marincic 1998.

[119] Parker 1995: 486; cf. Riedweg 2002; Graf and Johnston 2007: 139.

[120] Diod. Sic. 5. 64. 3–4; Ephorus, *FGH* 70 F104. Legends on Epimenides and Pythagoras include descents into the Dactyls' abode in the Idaean cave on Crete (above, Ch. 4.1–2, and below in this chapter).

Magic

H. D. Betz asserts that 'the whole of magic as well as its parts can be called *mystêrion* or *mystêria*... Handing over the magical tradition to a student becomes the purpose of a mystery-cult initiation.'[121] A person initiated into the holy magic is called 'blessed initiate' (*makarios mustês*), whereas the individual magic ritual may be described as a *mystêrion* or *teletê*.[122] In the fifth century BC, those who were dubbed *magoi* were credited with the ability to pull down the moon and change the weather by means of initiations, *teletai*.[123]

From the sixth century BC, Persian *magoi* were associated with initiations. Heraclitus prophesied fiery punishment after death to 'night-wanderers, *magoi, bacchoi, lênai*, and *mustai*', because in his opinion, initiations (*mustêria*) practised by these people were unholy. Although we cannot say whether those called *magoi* by Heraclitus were Iranian fire-priests or wandering charlatans pretending to be Zoroaster's disciples, it is clear that in the late sixth century people in Ephesus known as *magoi* were first and foremost experts in initiations.[124]

In these singular mysteries underground chambers played a noteworthy role. A Greek magical papyrus from the late third–early fourth century AD describes the sorcerer's catabasis into the underground megaron of the Dactyls as his initiation: 'I have been initiated, and I went down into the chamber of the Dactyls.'[125] It is noteworthy that the Dactyls, mythical Cretan smiths, famous as magicians and experts in initiations and mysteries, were said to have been born in a cave on Mt Ida, on Crete or in Phrygia.[126] The Dactyls belong to the realm of Hephaestus, the divine smith and the

[121] Betz 1982: 164; cf. Graf 1997: 23, 96–117; 1994: 163; Moyer 2003; Flint *et al.* 1999: 107–10. On the frequent combination of the roles of *goês* and initiator see Johnston 1999: 106–8.

[122] Betz 1991: 248; Graf 1997: 97. Cf. Delcourt 1982: 110–36, esp. 133–5, on the magician's initiations.

[123] Dickie 2001: 33; on the term *magos* see Graf 1997: 20–9; Dickie 2001: 14.

[124] *DK* 22 fr. B14; Graf 1997: 21; Dickie 2001: 28–31; cf. Ogden 2001: 106–7; Flint *et al.* 1999: 104; Bernand 1991: 52–4; Scarpi 2002: i, p. xxii.

[125] *Tetelesmai kai eis megaron katebên Daktulôn, PGM* 70. 4–25; Betz 1980.

[126] Diod. Sic. 5. 64. 3–4, citing Ephorus (*FGH* 70 F104); Apoll. Rhod. 1. 1129; Strabo 10. 3. 22–3; Delcourt 1982: 166–8; Bernand 1991: 202, 206; Johnston 1999: 105; Flint *et al.* 1999: 178–80; Blakely 2006: 14–15, 24–5, 77–98; Blakely 2007. The Dactyls were also renowned as purifiers (Eurip. Fr. 472 Kannicht-Snell; Harrison 1908–9: 315) and healers (Blakely 2006: 137–51).

paradigmatic magician. Hephaestus' complex initiations into his craft included a nine-year long sojourn in a secluded place, either in the submarine cave of Eurynome or in Cedalium's subterranean forge on Naxos.[127] The example of the mythological enchanter was imitated by his mortal counterparts.

The notion of retreat into underground chambers as an important part of the sorcerer's apprenticeship was not uncommon in the literature of the Imperial age. In Lucian's *Menippus*, a Cynic philosopher who wishes to visit the netherworld in his search for wisdom, learns from a Persian *magos* 'incantations and initiations' necessary to open the gates of Hades.[128] Menippus' descent is pictured as a bodily journey: he enters the subterranean domain through a chasm and leaves it by way of Trophonius' cavern.[129] This travesty was inspired by the reputation of the magi, commonly known as sorcerers skilled in initiations and experts in necromancy,[130] as well as in other methods of divination.[131]

Menippus' initiations were a prerequisite for his successful catabasis. In contrast, in another Lucian dialogue, the magician's catabasis is an integral part of his initiations: Pancrates the sorcerer descends for twenty-three years into secret subterranean chambers, where Isis teaches him magic.[132] D. Ogden demonstrates that 'revelation or initiation into the key knowledge in an underground adyton or crypt by a god or a ghost' is a recurrent motif in Greek narratives of sorcerers' apprentices.[133] Thus, (Pseudo)-Thessalus of Tralles depicts his studies of medical art as a prolonged process culminating in a conversation with Asclepius in a crypt, to which he was brought by a chief priest in

[127] Hom. *Il.* 18. 398; Schol. Hom. *Il.* 14. 296; Delcourt 1982. For the magical significance of the nine-year period, see below in this chapter.

[128] Luc. *Menip.* 6.

[129] Ibid. 10, 22.

[130] In fact, Aeschylus had already depicted the Persian queen-mother and elders performing necromancy, which implies that as early as in 472, when the *Persians* was staged, the Greek stereotype of the Oriental included the ability to cross the border between the worlds of the living and the dead: *Pers.* 609–80; Ogden 2001: 129–31; Dickie 2001: 29–30; cf. Johnston 1999: 117–18.

[131] Carastro 2007.

[132] *Philopseudes* 34, Graf 1997: 90; 1994; Flint *et al.* 1999: 107; Ogden 2001: 121, 131; 2006; Dickie 2001: 205; Bernand 1991: 336.

[133] Ogden 2006: 123.

Egyptian Thebes.[134] The opinion that gods and demons may be encountered in adyta of Egyptian temples occurs in a number of late Classical texts.[135] The conviction that secluded chambers served for the magicians' apprenticeship was so common that an anti-Christian slander accusing Jesus Christ of sorcery asserted that he had studied his craft in the adyta of Egyptian temples.[136]

Ecstatic elements are integrated into many magical rituals. The great papyrus text known as the 'Mithras Liturgy', which is interpreted as a description of Egyptian initiatory ceremonies, refers to the magician's 'prophetic ecstasy', and mentions 'rites of immortalization' (*apothanismos*) performed thrice a year.[137] Secluded chambers could serve as a very suitable environment for the sorcerers in search of prophetic trance and visions of encounters with the gods.

As argued above, there were apparently elements of mystery initiations in the activities of several charismatic Presocratic philosophers, who were credited with magic abilities—and with descents into underground chambers. To become a member of the Pythagorean sect, the aspirant had to undergo prolonged and complex initiations, and Pythagoras' own house was known as 'house of mysteries'. Multiple subterranean descents are ascribed to the master himself. Centuries later, Publius Nigidius Figulus was known in Rome as 'Pythagorean and *magus*'.[138] Parmenides' poem contains several allusions to mystery initiations. He and leaders of the association he founded were magicians (*phusikoi*), and their descents into the 'den' attest to the importance of underground chambers in the acquisition of wisdom and supernatural power.

[134] *De virtutibus herbarum (On the Powers of Plants)* 21–7; the treatise is dated to the 1st–3rd cent. AD; Ogden 2006: 123–6; Bonnechere 2003: 199; 2007: 39.

[135] Ogden 2006: 128 n. 24; Rebrik 2002.

[136] Orig. *Contra Cels.* 1. 28. 46; Burkert 2002: 19; Graf 1997: 91, 263, with references. On the attitude to Jesus as a magician, in Christian and non-Christian circles, see Smith 1978. Following the pagan pattern, a Christian tradition recorded by Eusebius pictures Jesus Christ initiating his disciples, dubbed *thiasôtai,* into the secret mysteries in a grotto on the Mount of Olives (*Vita Constantini* 3. 44; cf. Bérard 1974: 106; Lavagne 1988: 689). For Jesus as a magician and leader of initiations, see Smith 1978: 138. For grottoes in the life story of Jesus (esp. the nativity in the cavern) see Saintyves 1918: 166–202; Roux 1999: 311–12, 343–5.

[137] *PGM* iv. 738, 747; Meyer 1976; Graf 1997: 98, 101, cf. 111.

[138] Freyburger-Galland *et al.* 1986: 212–22.

The image of the philosopher as secluded mystic and magician was familiar to the Athenian public in the fifth century.[139] Aristophanes' *Clouds*, written in 423, lampoons several key elements of the paradigmatic philosopher's way to wisdom. Inside a 'house of contemplation' (*phrontistêrion*)[140] presided over by Socrates, the esteemed master and ascetic religious leader,[141] his disciples are absorbed in thought. The philosophers are pale,[142] supposedly because they spend most of their time in the *phrontistêrion*, and don't see the light of day. In the search for wisdom, their souls fly away.[143] The *phrontistêrion* is described as 'a house of wise souls' (*psychôn sophôn*), a word play which alludes perhaps to the importance Socrates attributed to the cultivation of the soul, and at the same time suggests that the students resemble ghosts.[144] In order to join these wise souls, a newcomer has to perform initiation rites, including nudity, coronation, and covering his head with a cloak.[145] The teacher's tenets, which are not to be divulged to the uninitiated, include a conviction that Vortex (*Dinos*) is the king of the world.[146] Entering the *phrontistêrion* is compared to the catabasis into the Trophonium, which was considered equal to a descent into Hades.[147] The initiated are able to encounter the Clouds, the main deities worshipped in the *phrontistêrion,* who bestow wisdom on the mortals.[148] This wisdom, ridiculed by Aristophanes as mere nonsense, is very practical, and comprises healing and sorcery.[149] Comprehension of celestial affairs

[139] I owe the idea of citing the *Clouds* in this context to P. Bonnechere.

[140] Line 94.

[141] Master: *autos* 219, cf. the Pythagorean *autos epha*; 871: *didaskalos*. In 359–60 the Clouds address Socrates as 'priest' (*hiereus*) and 'expert in celestial things' (*meteôrosophistês*).

[142] 104, cf. 504.

[143] 319: Strepsiades' soul 'flies away'; 1125 and 1503: Socrates is *aerobatês*, 'air-walker', like miracle-workers and diviners Abaris and Musaeus credited with the ability to fly (Porph. *Vita Pyth.* 29; Paus. 1. 22. 7): cf. Meulder 1994: 104–7; on Abaris and soul-travelling see above, Ch. 4.1.

[144] In the *Birds* 1553–64 Socrates is portrayed as a necromancer.

[145] 254–6, 495–9, 740; Marianetti 1992: 41–75; Byl 1994.

[146] Secret tenets: 140, 143; vortex: 380, 828, cf. Meulder 1994: 115. On the significance of vortex in Empedocles' philosophy, see above Ch. 4.4.

[147] Line 508, cf. Bonnechere 1998; 2003: 132–8, 192–6; Freyburger-Galland *et al.* 1986: 127. For Trophonius see above, Ch. 2.3.

[148] 316–17.

[149] e.g. 332, 749–55.

and reverence towards the Clouds enable the initiated to control them, that is, grant magical abilities.[150]

A parody of mysteries revered by the Athenians, such as the Eleusinian mysteries, would have been considered blasphemous rather than amusing by Aristophanes' audience.[151] The Pythagorean school or the entire Italian philosophical tradition, imbued with mystical, and especially Orphic, religious elements, are much more appropriate targets for comic mockery.[152] Aristophanes presents a grotesque description of a secluded place where the philosophers are engaged in contemplation; an authoritative teacher; a secret doctrine of the vortex that rules the world; complex initiations which are compared to descent into the infernal world; out-of-body journeys of the enlightened souls; encounters with gods; and finally ability to perform miracles. These elements must have been easily recognizable, otherwise the play would not have roused the Athenian audience to laughter. Hence, in the eyes of the fifth century public, performance of mystery rites, seclusion, soul-travelling, revelations, and magical abilities were considered typical of illuminated thinkers, and their search for wisdom was still associated with the descent into the netherworld.

This fragmentary evidence suggests that, for the initiation of a magician into the mysteries of his art, a subterranean or isolated chamber could serve either as the setting for secret rites, restricted in time similarly to most mystery cults, or as the location of a long sojourn, like that ascribed to Epimenides.[153] In the latter case, the emphasis would be on prolonged visions, whereas in the former case it would be on the impact of awe-inspiring surroundings.

[150] 253–65, 426–32.

[151] Guthrie 1952: 212 (suggesting the Orphic initiations instead); Marianetti 1992: 49, see however ibid. 55–7, 72; Byl 1994: 52; Couloubaritsis 1994: 70; Meulder 1994: 101 on Eleusinian allusions.

[152] Marianetti 1992: 49, 63–71, 103–7; Freyburger-Galland *et al.* 1986: 126–8. G. Grote has already noted the connection between the burning of the *phrontistêrion* and the destruction of the Pythagoreans in Croton (Grote 1847: iv. 335, cited by Marianetti 1992: 104). Trials required for the admission into the *phrontistêrion* may have made fun of the strict rules of the Pythagorean brotherhood. Couloubaritsis 1994: 84–5 compares Parmenides' road to wisdom with the behaviour of the philosophers portrayed in the *Clouds*.

[153] In his discussion of magical divination, Iamblichus lists several methods of obtaining inspired visions: first of all, 'taking darkness as an associate' (*oi . . . skotos sunergon labontes*, *De myst.* 3. 14), and, in addition, incantations and ingestion of potions. Cf. Graf 1997: 105 on two types of the magician's initiations.

Male initiations

The Idaean cave on Crete housed traditional initiation cults, which are attested from the Geometric period onwards.[154] The cave was sacred to Zeus and his retinue, which included the Nymphs who raised him, the warlike Couretes, and the sorcerer Dactyls.[155] From the ninth century, the bronze shields manufactured for ritual use and dedication at the cave feature representations of armed dancers.[156] These dancers are portrayed as bearded adults, therefore rituals at the Idaean cave were most likely intended not only for adolescents, but also for mature men, who formed a 'mystery warrior band' as a result of the initiations.[157]

We are fortunate to possess a detailed description of the rites performed by a very distinguished initiate, who is frequently mentioned together with Epimenides. Pythagoras is said to have descended into the Idaean cave.[158] Porphyry gives the details of this catabasis, which seems to be envisaged as a series of traditional ceremonies. Having performed the necessary purification rites, Pythagoras retired from the world in two stages. First he lay prostrate on the seashore during the day and near a river during the night, his head covered with a black ram's fleece. The next stage was his descent into the cave for the traditional thrice nine days, when he wore black wool.[159] On his return from the cave Pythagoras made a funeral offering to Zeus, inscribed an epigram on Zeus' tomb, and saw Zeus' throne.[160]

[154] Sakellarakis 1988; Watrous 1996: 58–9, 102; Willetts 1962: 241–53; Prent 2005: 598–604. The Couretes and the Dactyls are closely akin, sharing magic and ecstatic aspects: Harrison 1908–9: 311; Blakely 2006: 20–31.

[155] Above, Ch. 4.1; Dietrich 1986: 30–1; Faure 1964: 115–20; Blakely 2007: 56–9.

[156] Prent 2005: 372–6, 565–76; cf. Strabo 10. 3. 7 on the dances of the Couretes.

[157] Harrison 1908–9: 323; Burkert 1985: 280; Robertson 1996: 251; Prent 2005: 598–9. On armed dances see Blakely 2006: 123–36.

[158] Porph. *Vita Pyth.* 17; Diog. Laert. 8. 32; cf. above, Ch. 4.

[159] Nine is a sacral number in the cave cult of Zeus on Crete. Strabo (10. 4. 8) and Plato (*Leg.* 624D, *Minos* 319C) say that Minos met Zeus 'every ninth year', and in the *Odyssey* (19. 178) Minos meets Zeus *enneôros,* which may mean either that Minos was 9 years old, or that he reigned for nine years, or passed nine years with Zeus, or saw him once every nine years, see Ch. 4.1. On the magic significance of the nine-year cycle, see Delcourt 1982: 136, 176; West 2007: 329–30.

[160] *Pyth. Vita* 17. Rohde (1925: 96) suggests that Zeus' tomb was in fact the god's dwelling, similar to underground abodes of such personages as Trophonius and Amphiaraus (above, Ch. 2.3). Regrettably, there is no solid evidence for this assumption, which if correct, would imply significant correspondence between the cave cult of Zeus on Mt Ida and the cults of subterranean dwellers.

These actions are usually viewed in the context of death and resurrection rites in the cult of Zeus Zagreus.[161] However, it was either in the same cave or in another Cretan cave that Epimenides claimed to have learnt the truth from the gods, and Minos obtained his knowledge of the just laws from Zeus. Thus, in the cave sacred to Zeus the initiates could seek disclosure of secrets concealed from other mortals.

Porphyry's account contains precious details of a cult focused on catabasis rites. The three-stage procedure (purification and prostration with wrapped head, sojourn in the cave, and ultimately return to the world) seems to have followed some traditional requirements. In fact, the mysteries on Mt Ida had a very long history: almost eight hundred years before Porphyry, Euripides attributed pure life and a vegetarian diet to the *mustai* of Idaean Zeus.[162] The solitary stay in the darkness was presumably supposed to inspire visions that would be interpreted as divine revelations. The contents and intensity of the visions depended on the kind of the rite and on the initiates. Some would see phantoms of personal significance; others would marvel at images of eternity and ultimate truth which appeared in their mind.

The prolonged isolation from the outer world in the Idaean cave may be compared with long subterranean sojourns at Acharaca and in the Trophonium.[163] It is noteworthy that the ceremonies at Acharaca, as at the Idaean cave, were multifaceted and included maturation rites, as well as long sojourns in the caves. The Idaean cult of Couretes combined elements of mystery cults, such as the three-stage procedure of initiations, and orgiastic aspects, such as armed dances.[164] This combination is not unique: we have already encountered it in the Dionysiac mysteries.

A Hellenistic hymn to Dictaean Zeus attests to male initiations which were probably performed in the Dictaean cave.[165] Abundant archaeological evidence demonstrates the prominence of Cretan caves

[161] Cook 1914–40: ii. 934; Willetts 1962: 239–42; cf. Prent 2005: 595–6.

[162] Fr. 472 Kannicht-Snell; Cook 1914–40: i. 648; Harrison 1908–9: 315–22; Faure 1964: 114–15; Burkert 1982: 10; Liapis 2007: 392–4.

[163] Rohde 1925: 109.

[164] Burkert 1985: 278; Prent 2005: 600.

[165] Bosanquet 1908–9; Murray 1908–9; Harrison 1908–9; West 1965; Willetts 1962: 211–13; Watrous 1996: 105; Dowden 2006: 33–4; Blakely 2006: 126–34.

as places of initiations into warrior societies during the Minoan age.[166] Offerings of weapons and other dedications, as well as written sources, prove the continuity from Minoan to Greek worship.[167] With the Doric occupation of the island the rites were probably modified, but their location in caves persisted through the centuries.[168]

Initiation rites appear to have been associated with caves sacred to Zeus on Thera, another Doric island. There, caves jointly possessed by Zeus and Demeter were visited during the Carneia initiation festival.[169] In Thessaly, magic and cave initiations are interwoven. Youths from the most distinguished families of Magnesia were initiated annually in a sanctuary on Mt Pelion, comprising Zeus' temple and a cave of the wise centaur Chiron, a marvellous healer and *maître d'initiation*.[170] The initiates wore lambs' skins, which played an important role in magic and in divination.[171] Thus, in various parts of the Greek world Zeus was the supreme patron of male initiations performed in caves.

Isiac initiations

Two very different cults, of Isis and of Mithras, underwent vast transformations before they were adapted to Greek and Roman devotion. Notwithstanding their dissimilarity, the two cults had some common features: both were focused on exotic Oriental deities, conquered the Roman Empire, and in both cases initiations were held in secluded chambers or in caves.

[166] Marinatos 1993: 125, 201–20; West 1965: 157; Watrous 1996: 89. On Cretan rites of passage see: Koehl 1986.

[167] Sakellarakis 1988: 213; Marinatos 1993: 124; Watrous 1996: 106.

[168] Faure 1964: 162–3 suggests that the Cretan labyrinth was a cavern (in his opinion, the cave at Skoteino). Borgeaud 1974: 5 and Kern 2000: 30, 43 argue convincingly that the labyrinth was an image or a concept of a place of withdrawal and symbolic death in the initiatory context, rather than a structure that actually existed.

[169] Kose 1997: 94–5; Giallelis 1997: 59. On joint cults of Zeus and Demeter see West 1965: 158–9.

[170] Heracleides in Pseudo-Dicaearchus, *FGH* F 60 (8); Philippson 1944: 147; on Chiron see Ustinova 2005*b*: 508–9, with further references.

[171] Harrison 1928: 23–8; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 110–13; Roux 1949: 262–8; Braswell 1988: 318; Ustinova 2005*b*: 509–10, with further references. Cf. the use of ram skins at the sanctuary of Amphiaraus.

In terms of cultural affiliation, subterranean *anaktora* of Isis combine the Egyptian tradition of secret rites celebrated in the innermost sanctum of a god's temple with the Greek preference for secluded chambers as places of mystery initiation. The holy of holies in pharaonic Egyptian temples, to which only selected priests were admitted, was a dark room, the most distant from the temple entrance.[172] There secret rites were performed, in the presence of the god, that is to say—his statue, which was 'the very being of the god'.[173] The small and dark room was therefore the residence of the god, conceived as the focus of the cosmic order.[174]

The core of the Graeco-Roman mysteries of Isis was the goddess's own life story.[175] Plutarch ascribes the invention of the mysteries to the august goddess, who wished to preserve the memory of her wise and brave deeds, and to give mortals a source of piety and encouragement in their earthly struggles. Thus, she introduced 'into the most holy rites (*teletê*) images, hidden meanings (*hyponoiai*), and imitations (*mimêmata*) of her former sufferings'.[176] The initiate was supposed to feel the anguish of the goddess and to live with her through bereavement and the visit to the netherworld. Hidden or true meanings of images and rites were revealed to him as a living experience shared with the goddess rather than the product of systematic teaching, and the knowledge bestowed by the goddess redeemed him from the fear of death and other calamities.

The Graeco-Roman Isiac initiations culminated in the inner room of Isis' shrine, perhaps underground. Subterranean crypts are a regular feature of temples of Isis: they were discovered in a number of temples of Isis, at Gortyn, Mons Porphyrites (Upper Egypt), Pompeii, Sabratha, Thessalonica, Pergamum, and perhaps elsewhere.

[172] Bell 1997: 135; Assmann 2001: 32; 2002: 67–8.

[173] Shafer 1997: 6; cf. Bleeker 1965.

[174] Subterranean crypts characteristic of Egyptian temples of the Graeco-Roman period are regarded as a part of the basic tradition of room arrangement current during the earlier periods (Finnestad 1997: 189). Cf. Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004: 226; Bleeker 1965: 51 on the underground crypts at Dendara: it was suggested that they served as store rooms, but their wall decoration points rather to a cultic function.

[175] For the discussion of the relative importance of 'Greek' and 'Egyptian' components in the Isiac mysteries see Assmann and Bommas 2002, esp. Assmann 2002; Burkert 2002; DuQuesne 2002; Dunand 2000: 131.

[176] Plut. *De Iside* 361E.

In many cases, the underground chambers could be reached only through dark long passages; some crypts featured representations of various sacred motifs.[177] These underground structures may have served as images of the netherworld, where divine images were revealed to the initiate.[178] In total stillness, alone and naked,[179] prepared by prolonged fasting, ascetic abstinence, purifications, and silent meditations, the aspirant initiate could approach 'the threshold of death' and experience the overwhelming contact with the divinity, beyond the limits of space and time.

An Isiac initiation and the sentiments of the initiate are depicted by Apuleius in the *Metamorphoses*, written in the mid-second century AD:[180]

[177] Wild 1984: 1781, 1799, 1810, 1817–18, 1824; Wild 1981: 24–53; Salditt-Trappmann 1970: 18–21; Griffiths 1975: 284, 298; cf. Dunand 2000: 137; Freyburger-Galland *et al.* 1986: 271. Passages: Gortyn, Sabratha (Wild 1981: figs. 17, 19); works of art: the crypt at Gortyn features niches which presumably contained statues of gods; the crypt at Pompeii is decorated with stucco reliefs, Isis portrayed on the central panel (Wild 1981: 44–6; pls. 4–6; Salditt-Trappmann 1970: plan 6, fig. 50).

[178] Salditt-Trappmann 1970: 22, 64. The underground space in the temples at Pompeii and elsewhere is interpreted by some as a place for incubation or an oracular chamber (Roussel 1916: 31; cf. Brenk 1993: 158). Wild (1981: 24–53) argues that all the crypts served primarily as sacred Nilometers. However, the only case of a crypt with its floor entirely covered by water coming from a river is the subterranean chamber in the temple that belonged not to Isis, but to Serapis (Serapeum A on Delos, Wild 1981: 34–6). Water basins were discovered only in some crypts of Isea: there are none at Thessalonica; at Sabratha the crypts are not related to the wells and cisterns discovered in the sanctuary. Water basins in the crypts of Isea were not connected to natural sources. Wild himself supposes that the crypts were 'designed in imitation' of Nilometers (Wild 1981: 49): if so, the imitation was rather crude, given that the basins were filled with water manually. Moreover, basins interpreted by Wild as symbolic Nilometers were often located in conspicuous places, in courtyards or near altars, rather than in crypts (Wild 1981: 10–23). Hence the interpretation of the crypts in Isea as Nilometers is unconvincing, and the suggestion that water basins in the Isea served for ritual ablutions (Salditt-Trappmann 1970: 64) appears quite probable.

[179] Witt 1971: 161.

[180] *Met.* 11. 23; Griffiths 1975: 286–308, esp. 296; cf. Dunand 2000: 134–7; Freyburger-Galland *et al.* 1986: 269–74. Griffiths's evaluation of book 11 as conveying Apuleius' own experience as Isiac initiate, therefore constituting an authentic evidence for the Greek cult of Isis (Griffiths 1975: 6), is perhaps straightforward, because a romance cannot be trusted as an accurate report of real events. However, even if the account of the hero's initiation is an imaginary picture of a fictitious initiation (Griffiths 1975: 21–2, with bibliography), in order to be recognizable it would have had to be broadly congruent with what general public knew about contemporary mysteries. With this *caveat,* the *Metamorphoses* do indeed attest to beliefs and practices current in the 2nd cent. AD.

I approached the boundary of death[181] and treading on Proserpine's threshold, I was carried through all the elements, after which I returned. At dead of night I saw the sun flushing with bright effulgence.[182] I approached close to the gods above and the gods below and worshipped them face to face. (Translation J. G. Griffiths.)

The initiate uses an intriguing phrase, usually translated as 'In the middle of the night I saw the sun flashing with bright light.' This phenomenon is considered bizarre, and is associated with either the Egyptian worship of solar and chthonic deities or the concept of paradise where the sun shines forever.[183] However, this phrase is reminiscent of the bright light shining in the darkness in the descriptions of mental vortex, typical of the initial stages of altered states of consciousness.[184] The initiate even depicts the light of the sun as *lumen candidum*, which may mean not only 'bright', but also 'benign' or 'kindly'.[185] Furthermore, his flight 'through all the elements' brings to mind out-of-body experiences occurring in altered states of consciousness, including near-death experiences.[186]

At the climax of the Isiac initiation, the votary was 'alone with the Alone', to use the phrase of Plotinus, an Egyptian-born philosopher and mystic.[187] The initiate experienced 'voluntary death and eternal salvation',[188] an ineffable communion with the divine, which produced a profound and elevating effect.[189] Apuleius' description of the initiate's intense happiness in front of Isis' statue, in the innermost place in her temple, attests to spirituality imbued with sensuous element. This experience, which could be incited by the sublimation of eros, developed into a genuine mystical union with Isis, a radiant all-encompassing joy.[190]

[181] *Accessi confinium mortis.*

[182] *Nocte media vidi solem candido coruscantem lumine.*

[183] Griffiths 1975: 303–6; Griffiths 1986: 56; cf. Brenk 1993: 154–6.

[184] Above, Ch. 1.2.

[185] In book 11, *candidus* normally means simply 'white', for instance in 11. 10, 20; cf. Drake 1968.

[186] Rather than symbolic baptism or ordeal by elements, such as fire and water (Griffiths 1975: 302–3, 356). See above, Chs. 1.4 and 5.1. Cf. Burkert 2002: 21, who regards this passage as 'a masterpiece of rhetoric irony'.

[187] Witt 1971: 160.

[188] Apul. *Met.* 11. 21.

[189] Apuleius uses the word 'reborn', *renatus* (11. 21), and refers to 'the ineffable pleasure of the goddess' image' (11. 25).

[190] Griffiths 1986: 59.

Achieved as a result of the solitary vigil, it came from within the initiate's mind, which means that the Isiac initiation closely approximated the revelations attained by individual seers or sages.

At this point, it is important to emphasize the divergence between the ancient Egyptian and the Graeco-Roman traditions. In pharaonic Egypt, seeing a god in the temple was a physical experience, based on exterior vision, a direct view of a statue, which was actually illuminated and hence visible in the darkness.[191] Conversely, the accounts of Graeco-Roman Isiac mysteries imply an inner, mental vision of the deity.[192] This vision was apparently attained in an altered state of consciousness, which included mental vortex and out-of-body experience and was induced by the austerities undergone by the initiate.

Mithraism

In contrast to the Isiac cult which encompassed not only mystery initiations, but also imposing festivals and daily solemn services attended by crowds of worshippers, the cult of Invictus Mithras was open only to a limited circle of the initiated, men only, many of them soldiers and civil servants. The hieratic rigidity of Mithraism is astounding: during the first centuries AD, the same scene depicting the canonic bull-slaying god was reproduced in numerous chapels all over the empire, and the same hierarchy of the seven grades appeared in inscriptions from the Danube to England. The complex liturgy, based on military-like discipline, comprised various sacraments as well as initiations into successive grades.[193] Their aim was to cleanse

[191] Finnestad 1997: 214. See however DuQuesne 2002 on ecstatic journeys and initiatory practices attested to in Egyptian literature.

[192] A description of the way of life of Egyptian priests in the preserved fragments of the work of Chaeremon, a Stoic philosopher and temple scholar of the 1st cent. AD, is considered to indicate the change in the approach of the Egyptian clergy to the vision of the divine, 'spiritualization', which occurred under Hellenistic influence. Chaeremon is cited by Porphyry (*De abstinentia* 4. 6–8) as saying that the priests dedicated their lives to contemplation and vision of the divine, attaining honour, security, and piety through the latter, and knowledge through the former. It is argued however that this account might contain an adaptation of Egyptian tradition to the notions of Chaeremon's Hellenistic public (Finnestad 1997: 214–15). Whatever the actual position of the Egyptian priests during the Roman age, it does not affect the essence of the revelations experienced by the initiates into Graeco-Roman mysteries.

[193] Vermaseren 1963: 129–39; Campbell 1968: 304–14; Merkelbach 1984: 77–132. Beyond the universally held norms, there was some ideological and ritual divergence between different circles of Mithraists, Beck 2006: 52–3.

the soul and prepare it for the after-death trial, journeys, and final ascent. Admission to each grade was accompanied by austerities and trials of courage, which supposedly prepared the votary for the mystery of the subsequent initiation rite.[194]

Mithras is the 'god of the cave', and his temple was a cave, *spelaeum, antrum,* or *specus.*[195] Mithraea, either natural or artificial caverns, perpetuate this idea. Natural caves were modified to accommodate mithraea. A Mithraic building could include portico, antechamber, and crypt, which was the true mithraeum, featuring the bull-slaying scene and other works of art.[196] Porphyry, a third-century AD Neoplatonist, elucidates the symbolism of the Mithraic cave:

> The Persians initiate *mustes* (*mustagôgountes*), revealing to him the way down, by which the souls descend and the way back, and call the place a cave... Zoroaster was the first to dedicate a cave to Mithras,... the creator and father of all, since the cave was for him the image of the universe created by Mithras, and the inner arrangements inside the cave were signs of the elements and zones of the world.[197]

These explanations, inaccurate as a testimony on the historical connections between Persian beliefs and Roman Mithraism, are valid as a reflection of the views current in Porphyry's age.[198] Symbolically, the cave represented the celestial vault or cosmos.[199] Functionally, the Mithraic cave was the place where the sacred ceremonies were conducted, lit only by torches and oil lamps. Indeed, Tertullian describes mithraeum as 'a cave, real camp of darkness'.[200] Mithraea were quite small, with room for twenty to forty persons.[201] Some sculptures could be illuminated from within or from behind.[202] The effect of

194 Porph. *De abstin.* 4. 16; Campbell 1968: 315–16. On mock and real death in the Mithraic cult, see Turcan 1981: 91–7; Campbell 1968: 297; Burkert 1987: 103.

195 e.g. Stat. *Theb.* 1. 720; Porph. *De antro.* 5–6; Tert. *De cor.* 15. 3; Lavagne 1988: 679–80, 690; Merkelbach 1984: 133.

196 Vermaseren 1956 (*CIMRM*): *passim*, esp. nos. I. 129, 423, 652, 660, 706, II. 2296; Vermaseren 1963: 37–66.

197 *De antro* 6; in his discussion of Mithraism Porphyry follows Euboulus, an early historian of Mithraism (Campbell 1968: 6; Turcan 1975: 23–43; Beck 2006: 16, 42, 85–87). Porphyry's account as a Neoplatonist construct: Turcan 1975.

198 Bianchi 1979: 16; Lavagne 1988: 685–6.

199 Campbell 1968: 49, 248–70, 385–6; Gordon 1976; Merkelbach 1984: 113; Burkert 1987: 83, 86; Gordon 1976; Beck 2006.

200 *De cor.* 15. 3.

201 Burkert 1987: 42; 2004: 108.

202 Merkelbach 1984: figs. 87, 89, 99, 124, 145, 164.

such a place not only on a neophyte, but also on a Mithraic lower grade initiate, whose aspiration had been intensified by ascetic preparation and harsh ordeals, must have been awe-inspiring, enhancing mystic emotions and extraordinary apparitions.

Modern scholarship does not propose an explanation of the unique commitment of Mithraism to the cave-shaped cult places, beyond the reference to the cosmic symbolism. The most profound analysis of the mithraeum has recently been offered by R. Beck. Applying models developed by neurotheology, he maintains that the mithraeum, as apprehended by the initiate, was a case of 'cognized environment', for two reasons: the mithraeum was believed to represent the real universe in its eternity more accurately than any profane representation, and served as a place where the initiate was physically immersed in an image of the universe.[203] R. Beck argues therefore that 'if the mithraeum/cave was duly consecrated, "made sacred" by being properly made a model of the universe, then merely by being in the mithraeum and by apprehending it as the universe the initiate would effectively enjoy the freedom of the heavens. The heavy lifting of space travel is achieved *cognitively*.'[204] Yet, although R. Beck emphasizes that 'in the Mithraic mysteries *place* is prior to praxis',[205] he does not explain why the Mithraists chose the cave, rather than any other environment, as their model of the universe. His suggestion that 'a mithraeum, like a real cave, ... is an inside with no outside'[206] misses a crucial point, because every natural or artificial cave, by means of its opening, is connected to the 'outside', and it is passage over the border between the worlds 'inside' and 'outside' that makes entering or leaving a cave an all-important event.

Furthermore, the prototype of the mithraeum is not known, and the exclusive preference of the Mithraic groups for grottoes is paradoxical; as R. Beck observes, 'the Mysteries, in a sense, went underground, in sharp contrast with their royal [Iranian] antecedent, which was a cult of high, open places'.[207] Given the nature of the Mithraic mysteries as a synthesis of Iranian religion and Greek wisdom,[208] could the Mithraic cave be related to the role of grottoes

[203] Beck 2006: 142. [204] Ibid. 129. [205] Ibid. 142.
[206] Beck 2004: 87. [207] Beck 1998: 125.
[208] Merkelbach 1984; Beck 1998: 126.

in various Greek mystery initiations? As a tangible image of dark passages in near-death experiences, and an awe-inspiring environment, the cave was a most suitable place for the dreadful Mithraic ceremonies. In Greek mystery cults, caves are far from being as ubiquitous as in Mithraism, but the uniformity of the Mithraic liturgy can easily account for the standardization of the cult places.

It is suggested that cave initiations, as described by Porphyry, included both verbal explanations of the Mithraic doctrine and ritual re-enactment of death and rebirth.[209] It is plausible that this re-enactment was actually an ersatz 'brush with death', a mystical state similar to near-death experiences. As shown in Chapter 1, altered states of consciousness have their spectrum.[210] The experience of most Mithraic initiates could deviate only slightly from the baseline reality, but even a moderate deviation was sufficient to make them feel that they had experienced a life-changing event. In this respect, the Mithraists did not differ from the Bacchants: individuals who attained profound mystical states were few, as Plato says.[211] However, there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of these mystical states, probably similar to those depicted by Plutarch in the fragment cited at the beginning of this chapter.

Thus, the cave played a double role in Mithraism. On the one hand, it was a major, perhaps the most significant, mythological and cosmological symbol; on the other hand, it was an environmental factor of paramount importance, which made the ceremony of initiation a life-changing event.

In summary, the role of caves and dark spaces in mysteries was threefold. They were prominent symbolically, reminiscent of crucial events in the mythological biographies of the tutelary gods of the mysteries, and were therefore fitting *mise-en-scènes* for the ceremonies. Grottoes were even more crucial as surroundings which produce an intense feeling of severance from everyday life, inductive to numinous experiences of awe, revelation, and deep personality change. It was this altered awareness of the self and the environment that caused the initiates to believe that they had not merely participated in routine traditional rites but had undergone life-changing

[209] Beck 2004: 96–9; 2006: 43.
[210] Cf. Beck 2006: 44, 133.
[211] *Phaedo* 69D; Ch. 1.1 above.

experience. Finally, from the symbolic viewpoint mystery initiations represented the closest possible semblance of death, an imitation of near-death experience. As in such experience, the visions of the initiates included tunnel passages leading to light and beauty.

CONCLUSIONS

The Greeks knew of at least two ways of trying a 'brush with death': near-death states and mystery initiations. Literary descriptions of passages through darkness in the visions of *deuteropotmoi* allude to cave experiences. Such experiences during mystery initiations appear much more complex, vivid, and richly documented. In fact, in some cases the caves could exist both inside and outside the mind of the initiate, who would physically be present in a cave or a grotto, and feel carried away through the darkness to a kindly light. Mystery initiations as a way to overcome fear of death could be patterned to some extent on near-death experiences. Given the popularity of mystery cults, multifaceted cave experiences of numerous *mustai* were perhaps one of the most profound noetic sensations known to common people of the Classical world.

Retrospect

When Byron looked at the Belvedere Apollo, he saw 'the God of life, and poesy, and light—the Sun in human limbs array'd', the embodiment of the Greek civilization. This civilization left to the world an everlasting inheritance, Western philosophy, which began, many would say, with Parmenides. It may seem natural to envision both the immortal god and the mortal philosopher in appropriate lofty setting, the god in a shining temple lit by the Mediterranean sun, and the philosopher in a splendid hall embellished with Apollo's statue, like in the famous Raphael painting—but such images would reflect the real picture only in part. As we have seen, the Greeks often placed Apollo in dark nooks and caverns;[1] beneath the building of the Eleatic school, founded by Parmenides, was an underground chamber, known as 'the den'.

This paradox stems from the Greek notion of the pursuit of absolute wisdom. The quest for the ultimate truth is the kernel of both inspired prophecy and early philosophy. Its knowledge belonged to the gods alone, and could not be perceived by the limited human mind, held back by mundane thoughts. To share in the immortals' knowledge, one had to liberate the soul from the burden of the mortal body by attaining *ekstasis*, *mania*, or *enthousiasmos*, that is, by merging with a superhuman being or through being possessed by a deity. Whatever was perceived or uttered in these states, prophecy, poetry, or mystical insights, was considered to be inspired by the gods and immeasurably superior to anything deliberated by the senses in sobriety. In modern

[1] He is even portrayed standing near the omphalos inside a vault, presumably the Delphic grotto, on the famous 3rd–2nd-cent. relief by Archelaos of Priene, known as Apotheosis of Homer (Richter 1969: fig. 248).

words, attaining altered states of consciousness was a socially approved and admired way of arriving at visions, which were very different from any thoughts produced by the normal waking consciousness. Neuropsychological research demonstrates that contacts with deities and revelations are considered absolutely real by people who experience them in mystical states.

A great number of Greek oracular cults focused on caves, irrespective of the divergent nature of the divine patrons of these cults. In some instances, the association with caves may be explained, at least superficially, by recourse to the divine personalities of the gods. Thus, the Nymphs and Pan were the deities of wild nature, dwelling in caves. What could be more self-evident than to ascribe to their power those cases of trance, sometimes prophetic or poetic, which occurred in caves to people isolated from the society and from the light of day? Another category of prophecy given in caves is connected to the chthonic realm. Myth tended to place entrances to the netherworld in multiple caves, and many among them became seats of prominent oracles, where predictions were given either by the dead or by deities of the netherworld. Oracles of the Earth in all probability belong to this category.

The issue becomes more complicated when we move on to oracles belonging to several liminal figures, neither living nor dead, neither heroes nor gods, who supposedly resided in subterranean abodes. Their communication with consulters was direct, by means of visions or dreams. Foundation myths of these oracles are often far from flattering to their tutelary supernatural owners, and give the impression of having been invented in order to explain their predilection for existence below the earth. Contrary to the oracles of the Nymphs and Pan, and to oracles located at entrances to the netherworld, where the connection to caves may be explained by the nature of the deities and their mythology, in the oracles of the subterranean dwellers the cave location belonged to the initial core of the cult, which determined the nature and mythology of the tutelary deities.

Even more startling are several prominent oracles of Apollo where vatic activities were centred in caves. At first sight, the eternal youth from Olympus has nothing in common with the subterranean world, yet it was Apollo who descended there time and again, prophesying from the darkness of natural caves and artificial grottoes. In Delphi

the umbilical centre of the world, the oracle most respected by all the Greeks operated in a gloomy cavern or nook. The contradiction between Apollo's divine personality and his recurrent descents into caves indicates that sojourn in a cave was fundamental for the inspired vaticination which belonged to him *par excellence*.

Surveying the cave oracles, we encountered several types of 'mediators of the divine'. In some cases, they could be occasional visitors to caves. In other cases a cave became an oracular shrine, to which enquirers came with the express purpose of receiving prophecy by entering the cave in person. In other cases, the intermediary of the god in an institutionalized oracular centre could be a cult official, who went into the cave on behalf of the consulter.

It would be logically fallacious to devise an individual explanation for each instance of prophecy in caves. Ockham's razor—'entities are not to be multiplied unnecessarily'—calls for parsimony in assumption of the reasons behind multifaceted reality. In our case, it may be assumed that the fundamental reason for locating prophetic activities in caves was the need of the gods' mediums to attain divine inspiration, that is, to alter their state of consciousness.

Ages-long experience had taught the Greeks to induce altered states of consciousness by a variety of means, and for the purposes of divination they used at least two methods. The easiest and universally applicable technique was sensory deprivation. According to modern research, reduction of external stimuli leads to dream-like autistic states, involving release of internal imagery: cut off from exterior input, the mind concentrates on itself and produces 'from within' images and visions which may be interpreted as revelations of divine truth, more real than everyday reality. Today, normal subjects isolated in sound-proof dark conditions report hallucinations after a few hours. In the geographic setting of Greece, caverns and grottoes provided an easy way[2] to achieve total or almost total isolation.

The second method required special geological conditions, namely, a source of poisonous gas having a euphoriant or psychotropic effect. It was essential that the gas be inhaled in sufficient

[2] On the abundance of caves in the Aegean karst landscape, see Higgins and Higgins 1996: 13–14; Wickens 1986: 10–17. Attica alone possesses more than 300 caves (Wickens 1986: i. 3).

concentration, therefore in a closed space. Natural combination of these requirements was provided by clefts opening into caves in the Meander valley, whereas in Delphi the prophetic gas was to be inhaled inside an artificial grotto.

Thus, caves were instrumental in stimulating altered states of consciousness in two ways, either as places of isolation causing sensory deprivation, or as closed spaces allowing inhalation of narcotic gases in appropriate dosage. This psychotropic or, in the opinion of the Greeks, numinous quality of the caves was common knowledge to such a degree that the association of seers and prophets with caves became universal. In several oracular cults, the process of attaining altered states of consciousness still existed in the Classical period; in others, the procedure evolved in the direction of formalization, but retained important traces of its origin. Caves housed some lot oracles which did not involve divine inspiration and could have functioned in any environment, which implies that a grotto was deemed the appropriate setting for any kind of divination. Location in caves was also a standard feature of quasi-historical and mythological oracles, such as the oracle at Lake Avernus. Similarly, biographies of mythological seers, for instance the Sibyl, the quintessential clairvoyant, often depict them living or staying in caverns. Popular recognition of the connection between visual deprivation and inner vision, prophetic or poetic, is reflected in the common folklore figures of blind seer and bard.

In their search for the ultimate truth some Greek sages and philosophers, as their biographies and their works testify, stayed in caverns or descended to underground chambers. Others depict in their writings experiences involving mental images of caves or tunnels. The renowned purifier and sage Epimenides, it was believed, slept in a cave for decades and had visions of meetings with gods. Ancient tradition ascribes recurrent withdrawals into the seclusion of caves and underground chambers to Pythagoras, the founder of an esoteric sect, credited with mystical experiences and magical abilities.

The case of the Eleatic school is particularly impressive, since our evidence on the importance of underground chambers in its activities includes archaeological data and a description by its founder, Parmenides, of a mystical experience. The school was headed by a 'lord of the den', pholarch, and its seat comprised a subterranean chamber. In his poem Parmenides describes a mystical flight through the netherworld

to the light and enlightenment by a goddess, who taught him the truth. This divine truth became his doctrine, which totally disregarded sensory perception of the surrounding world, but comprehended reality as unitary, eternal, indivisible, and motionless. It fully matches the core of mystical insights attained in altered states of consciousness, namely that the world of appearances is illusory, and the true being is an indivisible eternal whole. Moreover, in order to arrive at an altered state of consciousness modern experiencers pass through several stages, one of them known as mental vortex or tunnel experience—and the main elements of the mental vortex are present in the Parmenides' description of his spiritual journey. Finally, the school founded by Parmenides possessed an underground 'den', which provided isolation from the outside world and the resulting sensory deprivation. Modern research demonstrates that sensations of spacelessness and of limitlessness of self, summarized in the notion of absolute unitary being, are prominent in the descriptions of sensory deprivation. Thus, Parmenides developed his conception through enlightenment attained in a mystical state, which he most probably reached by means of sensory deprivation in a secluded place.

Empedocles describes his mental vortex in an intriguing fragment. Some other surviving passages are interpreted as a catabasis story. Given his allusions to other mystical experiences and supernatural accomplishments, these fragments suggest that Empedocles' revelations arose from mystical experiences comparable to those of Parmenides.

The experiences of Epimenides, Pythagoras, Parmenides, and Empedocles have another aspect in common: all of them could be (and probably were) envisaged as initiations. The feeling of belonging to the select few, secrecy, grades of admission, claims to magic abilities, change of attitude to death, the esoteric teaching—all these characteristics highlight the proximity of Greek *maîtres de vérité* and early philosophers to the arcane tradition of mystery initiations. Then again, their descent into caves and underground chambers in the pursuit of divine revelation demonstrates how close they were to seers and prophets who performed their art in the framework of conventional cults. The subject of the vision of the philosopher Parmenides differed from that of the nympholept Archedamus, but the paths they pursued to their visions presumably were similar, and ensued from the 'wired-in' reaction of the human brain to sensory deprivation.

Living through near-death experiences is also a part of being human, and the Greeks were acquainted with these experiences, as well. Today, one of the modules of near-death experiences, similar in many respects to intentional out-of-body journeys, is passage through darkness, conceived as a tunnel or a cave. Such passages are depicted in the few surviving Greek literary accounts of near-death experiences. The sensation of flight through a dark cave, recurring in near-death and out-of-body states, added another dimension to the numinosity attributed to caves, which were viewed as conductive to the world of eternal bliss.

Basically, mystery cults promised to initiates what near-death experiences granted to those who were privileged to live through them and return to life: harmony and acceptance in this world, as well as lack of fear of death and hope of a happy post-existence in the other world. It is therefore no surprise that mystery initiations were essentially a fake death, a rehearsal of the real one. Caves and closed chambers were essential as settings for many mystery rites, altering the initiate's state of consciousness and enhancing the impact of the ceremonies on his personality. As mental pictures of dark passages, they were often present in the initiate's visions, as well.

Cave experiences were not simple everyday happenings, but nor were they rare. The depth and impact of cave experiences varied from individual to individual and depended on numerous factors, yet they occurred all over the Greek world and were familiar to many. Great numbers of initiates lived through some kind of cave experience during mystery rites. Numerous enquirers descended into oracular caves. Nympholepsy and panolepsy were common and well-known. Near-death experiences were considered exceptional, but they did occur and were widely discussed. Many people witnessed the cave experiences of others: private people and representatives of states were present during prophetic séances in Delphi, and still more received accounts of proceedings in this and other oracular shrines focused on grottoes and underground chambers. Some esoteric thinkers preserved their methods of attaining revelations in secret, but others did not conceal them, or at least made public enough details to make the whole story comprehensible.

The numerous cave experiences of the Greeks were culturally patterned responses to the states determined by the universalities of the neurology of the human brain. This observation has an important

corollary related to the much-disputed problem of Greek shamanism and its derivation. Greek 'intermediaries of the gods', who claimed possession of superhuman knowledge and abilities and are often labelled as 'shamanic figures', did not learn their ecstatic techniques from foreign cultures. Since the ability to achieve altered states of consciousness is universal, the mystical feats of the Greeks were born out of the inherent biological capability of the brain, enhanced by age-old methods of manipulation, such as fasting or sensory deprivation.

Paradoxically, the universality of Greek cave experiences is best reflected in the Roman usage: *antrum* (cave) in Latin may mean any 'oracle' irrespective of the layout of the sanctuary, while Roman *musaea* were designed as artificial caves.[3] Apollo's nooks and the Eleatic den lived on, disguised by the customs of another culture.

[3] *TLL* 2. s.v. *antrum*, cf. Spaltenstein 1986–90: i. 178; for *musaea* see above, Ch. 4.3, and *TTL* 8. s.v. *museum*.

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