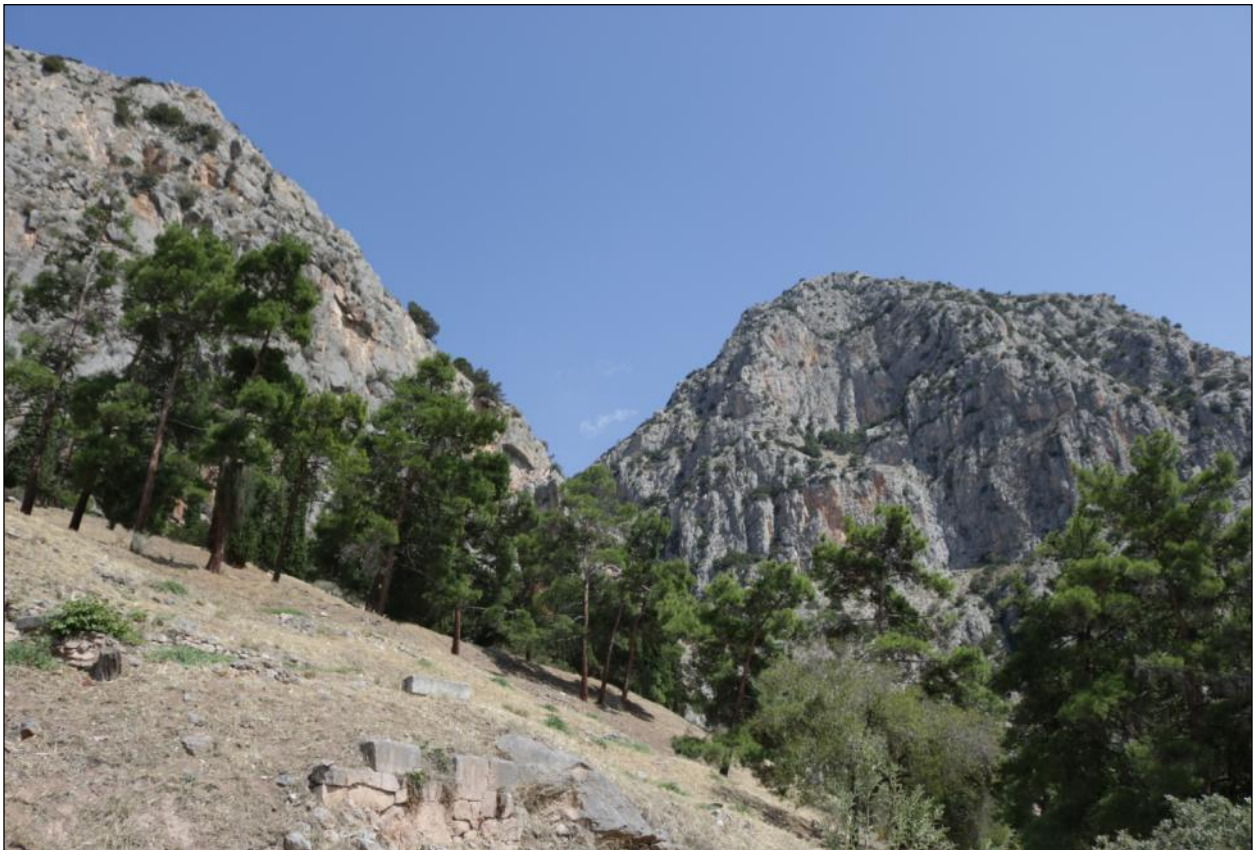


DELPHI

Located about 75 straight-line miles northwest of Athens (110 miles by car), the ancient site of Delphi is perched high (about 1,900 feet) on the southern slope of Mount Parnassus overlooking the Pleistus River. Its ruins bear witness to the architectural skill of the ancient Greeks, as well as to their religious devotion, the competition between city-states, and personal ambition in the games. While the area was settled during the Mycenaean Period (1600-1100 B.C.), the excavated ruins point to its great prominence in the first millennium B.C.



The Phaedriades, Two Towering Rocks of Mount Parnassus

Although not directly mentioned in the Bible, Delphi was an important location in the ancient world. For the Greeks and many other peoples, the place was identified as “the navel of the earth.” According to Greek mythology, Zeus sent out two eagles from the eastern and western ends of the earth, and they met at its center—the site of Delphi. The sacred Omphalos Stone was used to mark the navel of the earth there (Pausanias *Description of Greece* 10.6.1; 10.16.3; Plutarch *Moralia* 409E; Euripides *Ion* 224; Pindar *Pythian Odes* 4.4). Delphi was considered to be the center of divine oracles. Similar places of pagan revelation in Greece and its surrounding countries included Dodona, Trophonius, Erythaea, Didyma, and Cumae.

The Navel of the Earth

Other places in the ancient world were considered to be “the navel of the earth” by various peoples (see Pausanias *Description of Greece* 2.13.7; Diodorus Siculus *Library of History* 5.70.4). Even among the Israelites, a place near Shechem in Israel seems to be described this way in the Hebrew text of Judges 9:37. The New Jerusalem Bible translates the phrase as “the Navel of the Earth,” while other English versions render it as “the center of the land.” The translation of *’erets* as “land” instead of “earth” in this case may be influenced by the fact that Shechem was located about half way between Dan and Beersheba, two cities used in the Old Testament to describe the extent of Israel’s territory (see Judg. 20:1; 1 Sam. 3:20). While the exact translation of the phrase is debatable, the place near Shechem (like Delphi) had been associated with divining the future, since Judges 9:37 also mentions “the soothsayers’ tree.” In later times, Jerusalem was viewed by the Jews as “the navel of the earth” (*1 Enoch* 26.1; *Jubilees* 8.19; Josephus *Wars* 3.3.5 [51-52]; Talmud *Sanhedrin* 37a).

At Delphi, the Omphalos Stone was kept in the inner sanctuary of the Temple of Apollo (Aeschylus *Eumenides* 38-39). Apparently, two golden eagles rested on top of it, reflecting the myth of Zeus’ sending out two eagles from the ends of the earth and their meeting at Delphi (Pindar *Pythian Odes* 4.4). This arrangement is depicted on an electrum stater from Mysia dating to the fifth or fourth century B.C. The coin also shows an ornamented Omphalos Stone (covered by a thick woolen net) and a dolphin underneath (representing the god Apollo).



Omphalos Stone (1)
(Delphi)

Various Omphalos Stones have been discovered at Delphi. (1) One is displayed on the ancient site. It is a smooth, bullet-shaped, marble object with the topped cracked off, resting on a modern concrete base. (2) Another can be seen at the Archaeological Museum of Delphi.



Omphalos Stone (2)
(Archaeological Museum of Delphi)

It is a replica from the Hellenistic or Roman period, with the ornamental woolen net actually carved into the stone. (3) Still another stone was discovered at Delphi by Fernand Courby in 1913 in the inner sanctuary of the Temple of Apollo. He dated it to the seventh century B.C. (W. N. Bates, "The E of the Temple at Delphi," *AJA* [July-Sept 1925]: 241).

According to Greek myth, a cave existed in the region of Pytho in Greece where the goddess Gaia ("Mother Earth") once uttered her prophecies (Aeschylus *Eumenides* 1-2). At that time, it was guarded by her son, the large and powerful serpent Python. During infancy, the god Apollo, the son of Zeus and Leto, slayed the serpent and then left that place. After a time of purification, Apollo returned and claimed the area for his own and took over the oracle (Euripides *Iphigenia in Tauris* 1234-1258; see Strabo *Geography* 9.3.12). From that point, he was worshiped as Pythian Apollo (*Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 355-374), and the site became known as Delphi. Although other explanations have been made, the name Delphi probably relates to Apollo Delphinios, for the god was said to have come to that site in the shape of a dolphin, bringing Cretans with him to serve as his priests (*Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 400-401, 493-495). The historical kernel in this Greek myth is that at Delphi the worship of the goddess Gaia ("Mother Earth") was replaced by the worship of Apollo.

The spirit of Apollo (or the Python) was believed to have periodically taken control of the priestess of Apollo. This took place nine times a year in the enclosed inner sanctum of the temple called the *adyton* (meaning "do not enter"). Once a month, except for the three months of winter, the priestess ("Pythia") would descend into the oracle grotto to inquire of the god, while sitting on a tripod. (This tripod is featured on some of Delphi's ancient coins, such as an obol from 480 B.C., as well as on Greek painted pottery.) Breathing in the gases seeping from a chasm in the floor, she would then produce an "inspired" message from Apollo. Some say that she would speak in Greek poetry or prose (Strabo *Geography* 9.3.5;

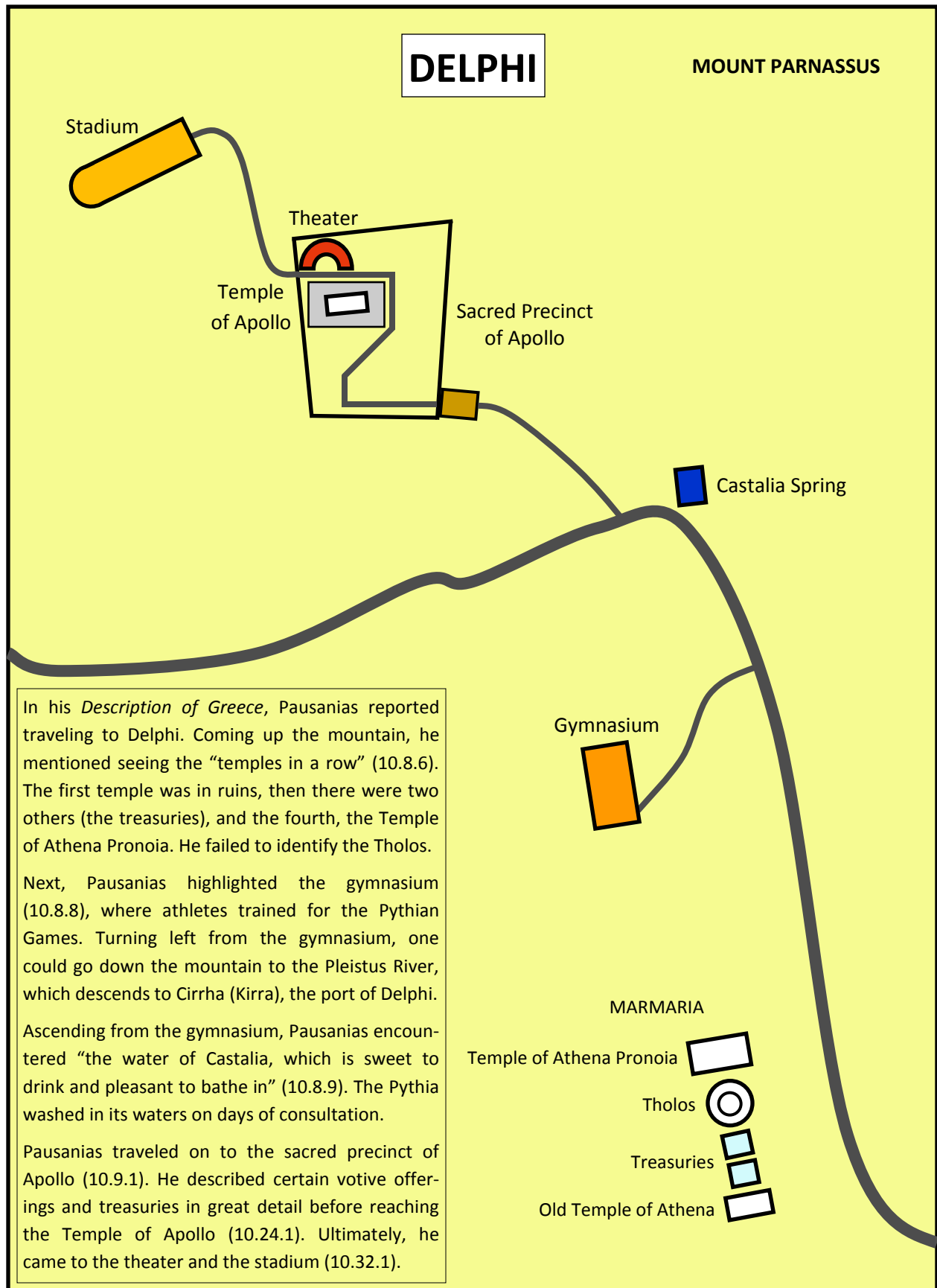
Pausanias *Description of Greece* 10.6.7). Others contend that she would speak in garbled language, and then her ecstatic utterances were “translated” by a priest. The prophecies were often ambiguous, leaving them open to interpretation.

According to legend, when Apollo slew Python, the serpent’s body fell into a chasm and fumes continued to rise from his decomposing body (Pausanias *Description of Greece* 10.6.5-6). The priestess was thereby intoxicated by these vapors, and she became entranced, allowing Apollo to possess her spirit and speak through her. Today, it is widely accepted that the oracle breathed in natural gases that seeped through the foundation of the Temple of Apollo (located over intersecting fault lines), which caused her to go into a trance-like state. Some envision her drinking the holy water of Cassotis that flowed underneath the temple as well as chewing laurel leaves (Pausanias *Description of Greece* 10.24.7; Lucian *Double Indictment* 1). Perhaps she did not operate in the winter months because the fumes were limited in the colder weather; it was also believed that Apollo lived in Hyperborea during these months. This was a mythical land of eternal spring beyond the north wind.

The priestesses were known as “bellytalkers” (*engastrimythoi*) due to the noise their voices made as the god supposedly spoke through them. The sounds of a priestess’ speech seemed to be coming from her chest or belly. Such practices differed from ventriloquism in that the priestess was reputedly possessed by a spirit and had little or no control over her utterances. Interestingly, early Christian apologists did not deny the reality of these events, but rather they attributed them to the working of evil spirits who had assumed the name of Apollo in order to lure men away from the true and living God.

Although Delphi is not mentioned in the Bible, Luke described the slave girl at Philippi in Acts 16:16 as having “a spirit of [the] Python” (*pneuma pythōna*), likely using the language in an accommodative sense. By using the term “Pythian spirit,” Luke was not endorsing the legend of Apollo and Python. Rather, he was employing familiar language that his readers would understand. The slave girl was involved in the practice of “divination” or “fortune-telling” (*manteuomai*). This same Greek word is used in the Septuagint for a practice that is always prohibited by God (Deut. 18:10; 1 Sam. 28:8-9; Ezek. 13:6; 21:29; Mic. 3:11). The possessed girl brought in a great sum of money for her masters (Acts 16:16). Like those inquirers who traveled to Delphi, the people in Philippi and the surrounding area were interested in their future and would pay the slave owners a good price to have their fortunes told. Perhaps the slave girl at Philippi acted in a way similar to the Pythia at Delphi.

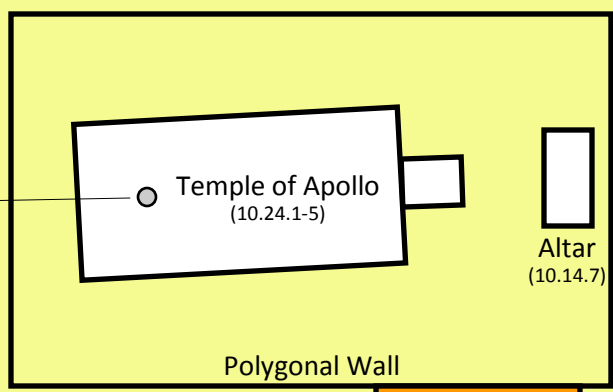
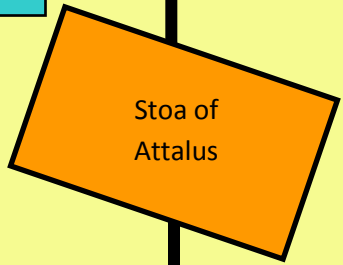
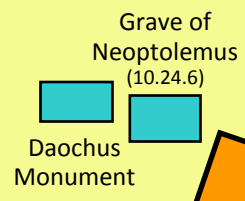
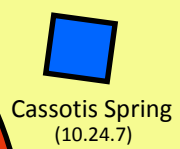
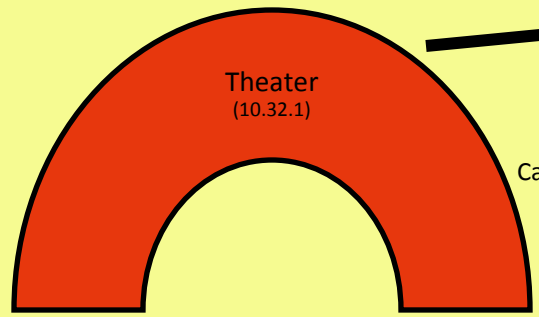
People traveled from all over the Mediterranean world to inquire of the Pythia concerning their families and futures. They paid a high price for a sacrificial cake and also offered a goat or a lamb, from whose meat the priests took a portion. Kings would even send emissaries long distances to receive advice on whether or not they should go to war. The oracle was at its height between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C. It fell into decline over the next several centuries. By the end of the fourth century A.D., the emperor Theodosius’ comprehensive ban on paganism brought the Delphic oracle to an end.



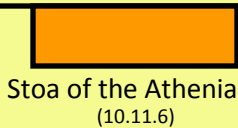
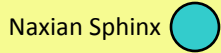
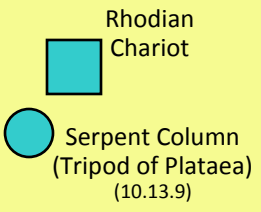
To Stadium
(10.32.1)

SACRED PRECINCT OF DELPHI

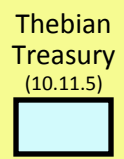
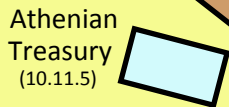
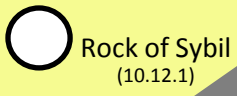
Keyed to Pausanias' *Description of Greece*



Omphalos Stone
(10.16.3)



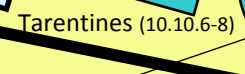
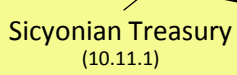
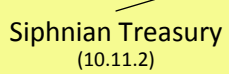
Bouleuterion
(Council House)



Argive Monuments
(10.10.5)



Corcyraean Bull
(10.9.3-4)



Epigoni (10.10.4)

Athenian Spoils (10.9.7-10.10.3)





The Roman Agora

The Roman Agora was adjacent to the main entrance of the sacred precinct of Apollo. This area served as a marketplace (where tradesmen worked in small shops) as well as a public meeting place. It was decorated with monuments and statues of the Greek gods. Leaving the agora, one followed the Sacred Way, a serpentine path leading from the entrance of the sacred precinct to the Temple of Apollo. It was lined with “treasuries” (where various city-states stored sacred vessels and votive offerings) and other monuments. Votive offerings demonstrated their deep gratitude to Apollo and the Delphic oracle. One can read Pausanias’ *Description of Greece* to learn more information about the treasuries and monuments that dotted the Sacred Way, although that work neither lists everything that was within the sacred precinct of Apollo nor does it always give the precise location of what is listed. Therefore, the schematic on page 6 does not name every building mentioned by Pausanias. Regardless, his writing leaves one with the impression that the city-states, by their votive offerings and monuments, were constantly vying for Apollo’s favor and competing with one another.

The Treasury of the Siphnians was constructed by the island of Siphnos in the sixth century B.C., after its inhabitants discovered gold and silver mines there (Herodotus *Histories* 3.57.2). Pausanias claimed that the god commanded them to pay a tithe of their revenues to Delphi. He further noted that they built the treasury and continued to pay until they were overcome with greed; and when they stopped paying it, the sea flooded their mines (Pausanias *Description of Greece* 10.11.2). (For an artist's reconstruction of the Siphnian Treasury with its two caryatids, friezes, and pediments, see Michael Scott, *Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014], 106.)



East Frieze of the Treasury of the Siphnians,
Featuring the Battle of Troy with Memnon (Trojans) Against Achilles (Greeks)
(Archaeological Museum of Delphi)



North Frieze of the Treasury of the Siphnians,
Featuring the Battle of the Giants (Gigantomachy)
(Archaeological Museum of Delphi)



The Treasury of the Athenians

The Treasury of Athens was built after the Athenians defeated the Persians in the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. in order to house the spoils of war. It was one of the many monuments that was built by a people grateful to the god Apollo, who had supposedly spoken through the Pythia and ensured the Athenians of victory. The beautiful treasury, originally built in the Doric style, was reconstructed in the early 1900s. Most of the stones of this structure had been discovered in 1893, early in the French excavations at Delphi. The treasury is known for the hymns to Apollo that had been inscribed on its walls (128 B.C.), which included musical notations.

To the northeast of the Athenian Treasury was the Bouleuterion or Council House. The city council (*boulē*) met there, whereas the executive council (*prytaneis*) would have convened in the Prytaneion. The Amphictyony League—an association of neighboring states with a common religious center—also met in Delphi (Pausanias *Description of Greece* 10.8.1-5).

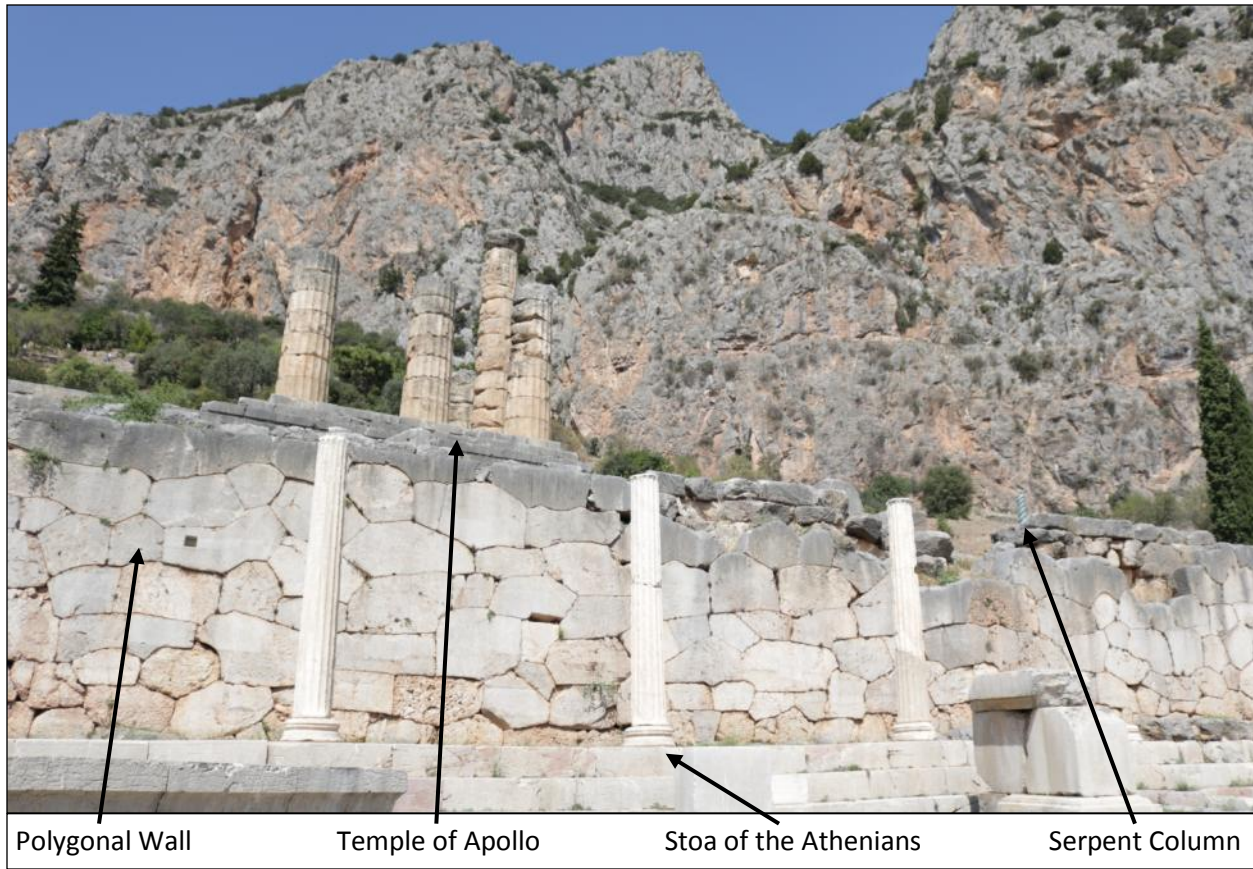
Beyond the Bouleuterion was the Rock of Sybil, which was discovered in 1893. During the time that Gaia (“Mother Earth”) was worshiped, the high priestess was referred to as Sybil, and she prophesied from the Rock of Sybil. Pausanias wrote, “There is a rock rising up above the ground. On it, say the Delphians, there stood and chanted the oracles a woman, by name Herophile and surnamed Sybil. . . . [S]he was the first woman to chant oracles” (*Description of Greece* 10.12.1).



The Naxian Sphinx
(Archaeological Museum of Delphi)

The Naxian Sphinx was located just south of the Temple of Apollo. The sphinx itself is over 7 feet tall, having the head of a woman, the chest and wings of a bird, and the body of a lioness. It once stood on a 33-foot Ionic column, making the whole monument over 40 feet tall. Therefore, it was visible all over the steep hillside of Delphi.

The sphinx was a votive offering made by the wealthy Naxians about 560 B.C. (Naxos was a Cycladic island in the Aegean Sea.) An inscription at the base was added about 327 B.C. It reads: “Delphi gave the Naxians the right of Promanteia as before, at the time of the archon Theolytos and the bouletes Epigenes.” “Promanteia” refers to the privilege of priority in consulting the oracle of Delphi.



The Polygonal Wall is named for the shape of the stones used in its construction. The wall was built as support for the terrace on which the Temple of Apollo stood. The manumission of hundreds of slaves are recorded on this wall, as well as on the side entrances of the theater (200 B.C.—A.D. 100). Slaves had to serve their time or earn enough money in order to purchase their freedom. The act of manumission had to be guaranteed by a god, in this case Apollo. The slave actually purchased his own freedom, but he was fictitiously sold to the god.

The Stoa of the Athenians was a covered porch, open on one side and running east and west. The Polygonal Wall served as its northern wall; on its southern side, the stoa was open to the Sacred Way. Historians often date this structure about 478 B.C., after the Athenians had secured several victories against the Persians. However, Pausanias related the stoa and its spoils to the later Peloponnesian Wars (Pausanias *Description of Greece* 10.11.6).

To the east of Apollo's temple was the Serpent Column, also known as the Delphi Tripod or Plataean Tripod. The ancient bronze column is now located at the Hippodrome of Constantinople (Istanbul). It was first set up at Delphi in 478 B.C. by the Greeks from spoils of the Battle of Plataea, commemorating their victory over the Persians the previous year; but later it was moved by Constantine in A.D. 324. A replica has been erected at Delphi, reminding tourists of the bronze column's earlier presence there. In ancient times, it had three intertwined serpents with three heads at the top supporting a golden tripod (Herodotus *Histories* 9.81.1).



A Head from the Original Serpent Column
(Museum of the Ancient Orient, Istanbul)



Serpent Column Replica (Delphi)

On the other side of the Sacred Way and in front of the Temple of Apollo was the Altar of the Chians, dating from the fifth or fourth century B.C. It had been donated by the people of Chios, a Greek island off the coast of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). The altar would have been used to make sacrifices to the gods. It was rectangular in shape, being constructed from black stones and topped with flat marble. An inscription at the corner of the altar's base reads, "ΔΕΛΦΟΙ ΕΔΩΚΑΝ ΧΙΟΙΣ ΠΡΟΜΑΝΤΕΙΗΝ." These Greek words can be translated, "The Delphians gave the Chians priority in consulting the oracle."



Altar of the Chians Inscription



Marble *Kouroi* Dedicated to Apollo, Perhaps Representing the Legendary Brothers Kleobis and Biton
(Archaeological Museum of Delphi)



Silver Bull Dedicated to Apollo
(Archaeological Museum of Delphi)



The Charioteer
(Archaeological Museum of Delphi)

The Bronze Charioteer is one of several athletic statues which were dedicated to the god Apollo. In either 478 or 474 B.C., Polyzalos, the tyrant of Gela in Sicily, apparently donated a bronze chariot to the Temple of Apollo to commemorate his victory in the Pythian Games.

It has been suggested that a landslide in the fourth century B.C. caused the statue to be buried in the earth and thus preserved. However, the driver's left arm, chariot, and four horses are missing.

The charioteer is a life-size statue of a tall, young man wearing a long tunic (*xystis*). Some think his calm demeanor suggests that he is enjoying a victory lap as opposed to engaging in the heat of competition.

Chariot races took place in the hippodrome, somewhere in the plain of Krissa below the mountain.

This statue was discovered near the temple in the French excavations of 1896.

The Dancers of Delphi, also known as the Acanthus Column, features three female figures on the top of a column. Each of the figures is wearing a short tunic (*chitōn*) as well as a basket-like headdress. They surround acanthus leaves. Their floating position, each with an arm upraised, has resulted in the designation “Dancers.” It has been suggested that each upraised hand once supported the leg of a tripod, an important symbol connected to the Pythia’s prophesying.

Perhaps they represent Thyiads, or Maenads, women in the service of Dionysus who danced on Mount Parnassus. Another possibility is that they signify the three daughters of Cecrops I, a legendary Athenian king. The column was discovered near the sanctuary of Apollo in 1894.



The Dancers of Delphi
(Archaeological Museum of Delphi)



The Temple of Apollo

Over the course of history, the Temple of Apollo had been built and rebuilt several times. Pausanias listed five different temples; yet, it appears that at least three of these were legendary—a laurel hut, another of bees wax and feathers, and one of bronze (*Description of Greece* 10.5.9-13). Archaeologists and historians typically argue for three temples of Apollo. (1) It was originally built in the seventh century B.C.; this work is attributed to the architects Trophonius and Agamedes. However, it was destroyed by fire about 548 B.C. (2) The temple was rebuilt near the end of the sixth century B.C., but this structure was later destroyed by an earthquake in 373 B.C. (3) It was reconstructed again later in the fourth century B.C. by the architects Spintharus, Agathon, and Xenodoros, who maintained the same plans. The foundations of the pillars and the walls seen today reflect the restorations of the third temple.

Three maxims attributed to seven wise men were inscribed in the *pronaos* of the temple: (1) “Know thyself,” (2) “Nothing in excess,” and (3) “Surety [a pledge] brings ruin” (Plato *Charmides* 164d-165a; *Protagoras* 343a-b; Pausanias *Description of Greece* 10.24.1; Plutarch *On the “E” at Delphi* 2). There were also wooden, bronze, and golden representations of the enigmatic symbol “E” (Plutarch *On the “E” at Delphi* 3). The Delphic “E” appears on the coins of Faustina the Elder and Hadrian (Bates, 239). Plutarch gave a number of fanciful explanations

for the “E,” even though he had been a priest at the temple (Bates, 240; see Plutarch *On the “E” at Delphi*). Bates argued that the “E” was carried over from an old Minoan symbol of Crete for the earth goddess Gaia, who had been replaced by Apollo at Delphi (Bates, 241-46).

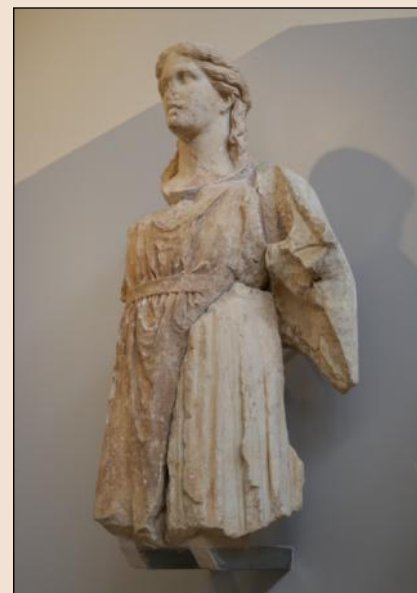
The *adyton* was the most sacred space of the temple, where the Omphalos Stone (center of the world) was located. As previously noted, it is believed that the Pythian priestess entered an underground chamber there to receive an oracle from Apollo.

In the archaic period, the east pediment of the temple featured Apollo’s arrival at Delphi in triumph, driving a four-horse chariot. The west pediment apparently pictured a battle between the Greek gods and giants (*gigantomachy*) (Euripides *Ion* 190-218).



Fragments of the East Pediment of the Archaic Temple of Apollo
(Archaeological Museum of Delphi)

One surviving sculpture from the west pediment of the classical Temple of Apollo represents Dionysus, the Greek god of wine. Dionysus was worshiped alongside Apollo—even though the temple was considered the latter god’s sanctuary. Since the Greeks believed that Apollo lived in Hyperborea during the winter months, that period was a time when their focus was upon Dionysus. Later, an annual spring festival, the “Theophania,” celebrated Apollo’s return to Delphi (Herodotus *Histories* 1.51.2). While Apollo and his oracle had international appeal, the cult of Dionysus may have been considered more practical for the mundane lives of the local residents of Delphi.



Dionysus
(Archaeological Museum of Delphi)



The Theater

Situated above the Temple of Apollo, the theater at Delphi has a spectacular view of the surrounding mountains and valley below. It was built from the local limestone of Mount Parnassus. It consisted of 35 rows of seats and held about 5,000 spectators. The theater was originally constructed in the fourth century B.C. and was later renovated in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. In the first century, the stage area had a frieze depicting the Labors of Hercules, which is now housed in the Archaeological Museum of Delphi. That artwork may have been added to the theater in preparation for Nero's visit to Delphi in A.D. 67.

Among its many functions, the theater was used to host the musical and dramatic competitions that were part of the Pythian Games, which date back to 586 B.C. Songs of praise were sung in honor of Apollo, who was considered to be the god of poetry and music. In ancient Greek literature, he is often associated with the lyre and the flute (see Pindar *Pythian Odes* 1.1; 10.39).

The Pythian Games were held at Delphi every four years in celebration of Apollo's victory over Python. Other Panhellenic games included the Olympic, Isthmian, and Nemean. (For more information, see the section entitled *Corinth & Vicinity*.) The Pythian Games were organized by the Delphic Amphictyony, a confederation composed of representatives from twelve Greek tribes.



In addition to the musical and dramatic competitions, athletic contests as well as horse and chariot races were part of the Pythian Games. While the horse and chariot races occurred at a hippodrome somewhere in the plain of Krissa (Pindar *Pythian Odes* 5.1-54; 6.15-19), many of the athletic contests were held in the stadium above the theater.

The stadium was built on top of the mountain in the fifth century B.C., and it accommodated about 7,000 people. The level ground served as the racing area, whereas the grassy slope was used for spectators. It is uncertain when seating was added to the stadium. In the second century A.D., Pausanias claimed that the stadium had been made of the stone common on Mount Parnassus and that Herodes Atticus rebuilt it with Pentelic marble (*Description of Greece* 10.32.1). Archaeological evidence for the Pentelic marble, however, is lacking.

Footraces at Delphi included the *stadion* (the length of the stadium, nearly 200 yards), *diaulos* ("double-pipe," or double *stadion*, about 400 yards), *dolichos* ("long race," approximately 3 miles), and *hoplitodromos* ("race of Hoplites," a race encumbered by Hoplite armor). Other athletic competitions included wrestling, boxing, pankration, and the pentathlon. Winners were awarded laurel wreaths (Pindar *Pythian Odes* 8.20).



The Stadium (*above*) and “Horseshoe” End (*below*)

