



Gods' Secretaries: On Preserving Oracles in the Greek Oracular Shrines during Hellenistic and Roman Times

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GODS' SECRETARIES:
ON PRESERVING ORACLES IN THE ORACULAR GREEK SHRINES DURING HELLENISTIC AND ROMAN
TIMES.

by Manfred Lesgourgues

On a very well-known kylix of the painter of Kodros, from the 5th century BC¹, is depicted the epitome of the Greek oracular consultation, or at least of the way Greeks wanted it to be depicted: two characters face each other, Themis acting as the Pythia and the King Aegeus as a consultant, in what would be a direct and oral way of communicating Apollo's words. This *image d'Épinal*, emphasizing the very moment of the divine revelation, has nonetheless been during a long time the tree hiding the forest: far from being limited to their acme, oracular rituals were a complex series of actions, both constructing ritually the conditions of a divine communication, and dealing with the communicated messages. They involved a great number of agents, whose role, largely underestimated and concealed in the ancient narratives, must be re-evaluated in order to fill some gaps in our understanding of the process², as what is kept silent is often much more informative than more fixed cultural representations.

We know, for example, very little about the way consultants handled the oracles once they were delivered: many conjectures have been made in the Delphic case, from the praise of the excellent memory of men coming from an oral culture, to the evidence that someone inscribed them³ - without really specifying who was doing it. This important prejudice about oral oracles is also what led Aslak Rostad⁴ to see in the use of writing in the sanctuary of Abonoteichos a feature denouncing magic. More singularly, the idea that literacy, as Jack Goody⁵ or Jocelyn Penny Small⁶ have demonstrated, is a technology that evolved a lot during the time, and peculiarly in the Greek world, is almost never taken into consideration: oracular rituals are seen as essentially conservative, according to the Greek epigraphic formulation that they were performed κατὰ τὰ πατρία. However, when considering oracular sanctuaries outside of Delphi in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, an interesting title appears in our epigraphic documentation, the one of γραμματεὺς, which means "secretary".

Occurrences of this title, or words related to it, appear throughout most of the documented Greek oracular shrines outside of Delphi, from Claros and Didyma to the Trophonion of Lebadea and the shrine of Abonoteichos, from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD. Nonetheless, maybe because the word *grammateus* seemed too obvious, for us, modern literate scholars, it has never been taken into consideration in a single study. Who were those Gods' secretaries? What were their prerogatives and role within the oracular shrines? And were they, as their political homologues, in charge of any oracular archival systems?

¹ Red-figure Kylix, 440-430 BC, Kodros Painter, Berlin F 2538.

² In a way, our work is inspired by the one of Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, who have shown that some of the agents of scientific practices were hidden in the narrative of the making of science. In order to understand the way oracles or scientific theories are fabricated, it is crucial to elucidate which part exactly every agents are taking in the process. B. Latour and St. Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: the Social Construction of Scientific Facts*, Berverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979.

³ G. Roux, *Delphes, son oracle et ses dieux*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1976, 150.

⁴ A. Rostad, "The magician in the temple: history and parody in Lucian's Alexander," *Classica et Mediaevalia - Danish Journal of Philology and History* 62 (2012): 207-230.

⁵ J. Goody, *Pouvoirs et savoirs de l'écrit*, Paris: La Dispute, 1986.

⁶ J. Small, *Wax tablets of the mind: cognitive studies of memory and literacy in classical antiquity*, London: Routledge, 1997.

Γραμματεῖς: from the political agent to the sacred one

As in modern languages, the term γραμματεὺς, “secretary”, bears in Greek a misleading transparency: the difference between a school secretary and a Secretary of State shows well the wide range of positions that those professionals of writing and retrieval can occupy in contemporary society. The same diversity is to be expected in the Ancient times, even more when we know that the skills of literacy undergo intense innovations during the Classical and Hellenistic periods.

The best documented γραμματεῖς in the ancient times are political ones, and more specifically the Athenian ones. The *Suda*, in its definitions of the term, emphasizes the fact that *grammateis* were “not in charge of any political action”, “πράξεως μὲν οὐδεμιᾶς ἦν κύριος”, and were confined in “writing”, “γράφειν” and “reading”, “ἀναγνῶναι”. But Aristotle gives us many more details about their prerogatives in his *Constitution of the Athenians*: secretaries – sometimes translated by “clerks” – were in charge of the debts’ archives⁷, the state’s archives and decrees, took note of the council decisions and made copies of the decrees⁸. Furthermore, far from being static, the range of their actions seems to have been in constant transformation during, at least, the fifth and fourth century BC in Athens, as James P. Sickinger has shown in his book about *Public records and Archives in Classical Athens*: secretaries became more numerous with the apparition of cosecretaries and undersecretaries, ὑπογραμματεῖς⁹, and their interactions became more complex and specialized with the apparition of ἀντιγραφεῖς, copiers, and ἀναγραφεῖς, recorders¹⁰.

The fact that the acquisition of organized structures of archives was such a work in progress in the biggest city of the Classical era, leads us to cast a new light on our interrogations regarding the way oracles could have been preserved in far smaller institutions such as the oracular shrines. As we will see, it’s very plausible that those practices and the part of *grammateus* were imitated from those political structures in the Hellenistic period. As a matter of fact, if we find political secretaries in Delphi in the classical period, such as the secretaries of the Council, of the Amphictyon¹¹, of the treasurers¹², of the temple-builders¹³ or of the hieromnemons¹⁴, none of them seems to be related to religious matters¹⁵.

On the other hand, the agents we are taking under consideration are without any doubt linked to religious matters in oracular sanctuaries. The first attested inscription here considered, found in the Thessalian city of Demetrias and written around 116 BC, sets some rules to guarantee good order, “εὐκοσμίᾳ”, during the consultations of the very popular oracle of Apollo Koropaios¹⁶. A “γραμματεὺς τοῦ θεοῦ”, literally a secretary of the god, is mentioned twice¹⁷ and even appears before the prophet of the god in the list of the agents summoned in the temple during the consultations, which confers him a great importance. This

⁷ Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians*, 47, 5 and 48, 1.

⁸ Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians*, 54, 3-5.

⁹ J. Sickinger, *Public records and archives in classical Athens*, Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999, 145-146.

¹⁰ J. Sickinger, *Public records and archives in classical Athens*, 143.

¹¹ FD III, 2:86: “γραμματεὺς τῶν Ἀμφικτυῶν.”

¹² CID 2:97: “γραμματεὺς τῶν ταμιῶν”; CID 2:93: “ὑπογραμματεὺς τῶν ταμιῶν.”

¹³ CID 2.75: “γραμματεὺς τῶν ναοποιῶν.”

¹⁴ BCH 78 (1954) 62: “γραμματεὺς τῶν ἱερομνημονῶν.”

¹⁵ This doesn’t mean that writings were not used in oracular practices: Dodona’s *lamellae* show that questions could be addressed by writing, and the famous Mys’ consultation pictured characters sent with the consultant to register the oracle he was given. Cf. É. Lhôte, *Les lamelles oraculaires de Dodone*, Genève: Droz, 2006; Herodotus, *The Histories*, VIII, 135.

¹⁶ L. Robert, “Sur l’oracle d’Apollon Koropaios,” *Ellinika: filologiko, istoriko kai laografiko periodiko syngramma*, Thessaloniki 5 (1948): 16-28.

¹⁷ IG IX,2 1109, lines 21-22 and 32-33.

title knows only one parallel: in an honorific inscription in Didyma, another oracular shrine, in the first century BC, Euandrides son of Akesonides is referred to as “γραμματεὺς τοῦ θεοῦ”¹⁸.

If in those two examples the link between the secretary and the god is explicitly made, a lot of inscriptions in oracular shrines imply such a connection by inserting the title of *grammateus* within lists of unquestionably religious officers. In two inscriptions of Didyma¹⁹, the secretaries, in the plural form, belong to a list mentioning the most sacred persons of the sanctuary, after the prophet, the *hydrophoros* (priestess of Artemis), the *hypochrèstès* (the help of the oracles), but before the group of the νεοκόποι, guardians of the temple. In Claros’ *Delegations’ memorials*, studied by Jean-Louis Ferrary, the presence of the secretary is quasi-systematic, after the mention of the priest of Apollo, the prophet and the thespiod (another agent of the revelation) from ca 105 to 176/7 AD²⁰. The religious nature of this function is then unequivocal. Around 180/160 BC, an honorific decree for Athenaios, son of Attalos, found in Claros, mentions also a group of secretaries within a list of sacred functionaries benefiting from sacrifices made for the *honorandus* in the sanctuary²¹. The appearance of the office in both sanctuaries seems then to be anchored in the Hellenistic period and it may be relevant to underline that both Ptolemaic and Attalid kingdoms, influent in Ionia at the time, were achieving great improvements in the archival techniques by developing their well-known libraries contemporarily. But oracles are not decrees, and shrines are not cities: what was then the function of a secretary in a Greek oracular shrine?

Epigraphical silhouette of the oracular secretaries: Claros and Didyma

No literary evidence casts a direct light onto the functions of the *secretaries* in the two shrines where their presence is the most attested: Didyma and Claros. Nevertheless, those inscriptions show some traits that help us understand the office.

First, the secretary was annually appointed in Claros during the Roman period²²: Jean-Louis Ferrary has shown that iterations were possible (9 cases for 18 offices in 69 occurrences²³), but were not the rule. The reason of this annual recruitment is not clear, and cannot be exactly compared with the democratic ground of those of civic secretaries, that is to avoid one’s monopoly over a specific power, since priests and thespiods were in fact appointed for life in this sanctuary. This annual recruitment of an officer tends to make it a more honorific than technical charge, for people with technical skills such as archival ones may have not been numerous. We would then have to imagine that the continuity required by the archival work was most likely overseen by the life-appointed priests, or was taken on by subordinates linked to the sanctuary, such as the *neokoroi*. For example, in the oracular shrine of Amphiaraos in Oropos, in the Classical era, the *neokoros* was in charge of inscribing the names of the persons who were to follow the ritual of incubation²⁴. The technicality or sacrality of the archival work was then not high enough to require a longer commitment from rare specialists.

¹⁸ Th. Wiegand, A. Rehm and R. Harder, *Didyma. Zweiter Teil die Inschriften*, Berlin: G. Mann, n°416, l. 6-7.

¹⁹ D. McCabe and M. Plunkett, *Didyma*, n°509, l.8 and 511 l.6-7.

²⁰ J.-L. Ferrary, *Les mémoires de délégations du sanctuaire oraculaire de Claros, d’après la documentation conservée dans le fonds Louis Robert*, Mémoires de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Paris: De Boccard, 2014, 74-82.

²¹ SEG LVI 1227.

²² J.-L. Ferrary, *Les mémoires de délégations du sanctuaire oraculaire de Claros*, I, 83. For an analytic display of the different offices in each year, see p. 74-82.

²³ J.-L. Ferrary, *Les mémoires de délégations du sanctuaire oraculaire de Claros*, I, 91.

²⁴ LSG 69.

Secondly, if in Claros the office was prestigious enough for the name of its holder to be inscribed, making him one of the eponymous officers of the sanctuary, it wasn't the case in the Hellenistic period in the same sanctuary or in Didyma, where γραμματεῖς were designated as an anonymous group. Two non-exclusive interpretations can be made of this fact: either the office became more and more important during the time, the secretaries acquiring unprecedented power and prestige, maybe because the control of the oracular archives was more important; or the shrine of Claros was more inclined to name them for they generally belong to the same family of the priest or prophet, as shown by Jean-Louis Ferrary²⁵. But in both scenarios, the holding of the office became a bigger stake.

Thirdly, this office was time-consuming enough to require the presence of multiple people: as we've seen, the *grammateis* are referred to as an indistinct group in both Didymeian inscriptions mentioning them, while there was only one prophet, one *hydrophoros* and one *hypochrestes*. In the Clarian decree for Athenaios, while there is only one prophet and one sacred herald, the secretaries but also the priests are mentioned as groups. In Roman Claros, the number of secretaries fluctuates between one and two: while in the first half of the second century, most of the years we knew of two secretaries, there is almost systematically a single secretary in the second half of the same century²⁶. Nonetheless, it doesn't mean that this head-secretary didn't receive any help from subordinates. Even more, since the very badly known function of thethespiod appears in those same years, maybe those years witnessed a shift of prerogatives²⁷, some parts of the secretary office becoming holier and more stable: they would have been then attributed to the thespiod, appointed for life.

Finally, we can wonder if this office wasn't part of an informal and sacred *cursus honorum* (undersecretary, secretary, prophet then priest or thespiod) within each sanctuary, as Jean-Louis Ferrary has suggested for Claros in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. Therefore, we have five mentions of ὑπογραμματεῖς, undersecretaries, in the corpus of Claros, three of which seeming to show an evolution from this charge to a more prestigious one: in the forty-sixth prytany of Apollo (ca 106 AD), Dionysos, son of Potamon, is "*hypogrammateus*", and he becomes *grammateus* in the forty-seventh prytany of Apollo; more interestingly, in the prytany of Titus Flavius Agathopous, Cneius Julius Capitolinus – maybe a Roman citizen from an elite family – is *hypogrammateus* under the supervision of Diognetos son of Andron, who was himself a prophet some years before. Jean-Louis Ferrary has suggested that this former prophet and secretary was back in charge in order to supervise the inexperienced under-secretary, who was related to a prophet of the god²⁸. I also wonder if holding certain offices didn't require some kind of initiation²⁹, since we know mysteries were performed in the sanctuary: that would explain why, even if he came from one of the finest Romanised

²⁵ J.-L. Ferrary, *Les mémoires de délégations du sanctuaire oraculaire de Claros*, I, 92.

²⁶ J.-L. Ferrary, *Les mémoires de délégations du sanctuaire oraculaire de Claros*, I, 84-85.

²⁷ Maybe because the function of secretary has always been seen as « ancillary », I've never seen the hypothesis that the thespiod could have challenged the role of secretary, but almost always the role of prophet. And yet, we may understand much better the link between the inscription of the Smyranean Chresmologos and the thespiods, who are both referred to as ὑποφητῆς, by putting them closer to the archival prerogatives of the secretary. It would also explain the progressive disappearance of the mentions of secretaries in Claros, and would reinforce the idea that oracular archives became more and more important during the second century. It could even have occurred definitively under the thespiod Tiberius Claudius Ardys, who was a former secretary and prophet, and under which the secretary function disappears from the memorials.

²⁸ Being prophet three times between the years 159/160 and 171/2 AD, Cneius Julius Capitolinus was a person of special importance and most likely the father of the undersecretary under consideration. J.-L. Ferrary, *Les mémoires de délégations du sanctuaire oraculaire de Claros*, 102.

²⁹ J.-L. Ferrary, *Les mémoires de délégations du sanctuaire oraculaire de Claros*, 122-131 and n° 36, 41, 64, 106, 154, 173, 174, 176, 248, 251, 293 et 308.

families, a Clarian citizen couldn't be appointed as secretary out of the blur. On the other hand, this office was also a step to a higher position: some prophets were former secretaries³⁰.

Those imperial practices could find a parallel in a Didymean inscription, where Euandrides son of Akesonides, referred to as “γραμματεὺς τοῦ θεοῦ”, “secretary of the god”, was honoured for having been in the past a pious treasurer, “ταμιεύσα[ντα εὐ]σεβῶς³¹”. In this case, however, it would be the clerical training that would link the two positions, more than its honorific aspect: the secretaries were not often honoured by inscriptions in the sanctuary in contrast with the treasurers³². It is also worth observing that even though Euandrides is celebrated for his action as a treasurer, the title that identifies and distinguishes him in the inscription is the one of secretary. If we extrapolate from this isolated inscription, we could presume then that, in spite of their relative epigraphic discretion, the secretaries of the god seem to have been considered in Didyma of a higher distinction than the treasurers, and may have to demonstrate their financial skill before joining the clerks' office.

Annual, holy, absorbing and career-oriented: those are the main features of the secretary's office in oracular shrines. This documentation, however gives us little information about their relationship to divine speeches. The only hint epigraphic evidence offers for Didyma is the existence, in the 2nd century BC of a χρησμογραφίον, a place where oracles were recorded, that is used as a referential point in the description of the construction-work of the temple³³. But since this place hasn't been excavated, we can only speculate on its shape, exact place and function³⁴. The secretaries would in this way be linked to an archival process concerning the oracles.

Three clues on their functions

If we don't have any more information in most of the sanctuaries where this function of *grammateus* is attested, some sources give us some clues about what their prerogatives could have been regarding divine speeches.

Demetrias: organising information and consultants' flows

In the only evidence left concerning the existence of the oracle of Apollo Koropaios, near Demetrias, that we've mentioned earlier, stands the only partial explanation of what the γραμματεὺς τοῦ θεοῦ, secretary of the god, was doing. As Louis Robert has well shown, this decree concerns measures guaranteeing the good order, “εὐκοσμία”, of the consultation, and it refers a lot to the *god's secretary*. It appears from the main formulation of the decree that, even though the *grammateus* doesn't belong to the eponymous magistrates, he has been

³⁰ For example: J.-L. Ferrary, *Les mémoires de délégations du sanctuaire oraculaire de Claros*, 92-93.

³¹ D. McCabe and M. Plunkett, *Didyma*, n° 503.

³² The Didymean corpus count thirty-six honorific inscriptions for treasurers. D. McCabe and M. Plunkett, *Didyma*, n° 501-536.

³³ D. McCabe and M. Plunkett, *Didyma*, n° 107 and 108.

³⁴ O. Rayet et A. Thomas, *Milet et le Golfe Latmique*, Paris: Baudry, 1885, 57; B. Haussoullier, *Didymes, fouilles de 1895 et 1896*, Paris: Leroux, 1904, 94; B. Haussoullier, “Comment avait lieu la consultation de l'oracle?”, *Revue de Philologie, de Littérature et d'Histoire anciennes*, Paris 44 (1920), 253-254; Th. Wiegand, “Bericht über die Ausgrabungen und Untersuchungen zu Milet und Didyma,” *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 49 (1924), 20; Th. Wiegand and H. Knackfuss, *Didyma, I: Die Baubeschreibung*, Berlin: Mann, 1941, 154. Th. Wiegand, *Didyma, II: Die Inschriften*, Berlin: Mann, 1958, 156; K. Tuchelt, *Vorarbeiten zu einer Topographie von Didyma. Eine Untersuchung der inschriftlichen und archäologischen Zeugnisse*, Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1973, 50 and 77; J. Fontenrose, *Didyma: Apollo's oracle, cult and companions*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, 43; A. Lampinen, “Θεῶν μεμελημένε Φοῖβω: oracular functionaries at Claros and Didyma in the imperial period”, in *Studies in ancient oracles and divination*, M. Kajava (ed.), Roma: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 2013, 77.

already given functions in the ritual long before the adoption of the text, by contrast with the “ῥαβδοῦχοι”, “the rod-bearers”, established by it. Although he’s mentioned at the end of the list of the temple officials, he precedes the προφήτης, prophet, which may be seen as an unexpected mark of precedence and importance of the charge. Since his function existed before the decree, his core occupations remained implicit.

However, the new responsibilities of the secretary conferred by this decree inform us about the kind of actions he was responsible for. First, he lists the names of those who wanted to consult the oracle; thus he builds a list³⁵ on a white board that he’ll then make public in front of the temple³⁶; he calls the consultants one by one and handles their absence by reorganising the passage order according to the list; he escorts and introduces the consultant into the temple³⁷. All these actions, that are quite complex when handled ritually by a single agent are outstanding, for they are less connected to the acts of writing and recording, than to manipulation skills of information and individuals. The fact that those prerogatives lie with the secretary outlined competences that are more of an archival nature than of a scribal one.

But far from being simply an educated gate-keeper, it seems that the secretary then joins the other officials of the oracle, listed before, “οἱ προγεγραμμένοι”, in proper clothes and pure state, in order to receive the tablets, “πινακία”, where consultants wrote their questions to the god. The actions, as the verbs show, are here collegial: they receive the tablets and, after an ellipse corresponding to the revelation ritual, they seal in jars tablets where answers are inscribed³⁸ and let the consultants spend the night in the sanctuary (“ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ³⁹”). We may imagine that the secretary was during these operations in charge of anything related to writing, but it’s a mere hypothesis.

The return of the third singular person line 46 designates again, in an explicit way, the secretary of the god: after the night, he’s the one bringing back the jars – he seems to have looked after them and be responsible for them– and after showing that the seals are still there, he breaks them and give the answers back, following the register he has created earlier⁴⁰. Here, again, the different actions are far more connected to the manipulation and organisation

³⁵ The idea of construction rather than of recording is due to the fact he has to deal with cases of *promantia*, that is the right to consult an oracle before other groups of consultants, granted to cities or individuals.

³⁶ IG IX,2 1109, l. 32-35: “ὁ γραμματεὺς/ τοῦ θεοῦ ἀποδεξάσθω ἐξαντὴς τὰς ἀπογραφὰς τῶν βουλομένων/ χρηστηριασθῆναι καὶ πάντα {ς} ἀναγράψας τὰ ὀνόματα εἰς λεύκωμα, παραχρῆμα προθέτω τὸ λεύκωμα πρὸ τοῦ ναοῦ”, “the god’s secretary will construct immediately the list of those who want to consult the oracle, and after he has written all the names on a white board, will at once display the white board in front of the temple.”

³⁷ IG IX,2 1109, l. 35-38: “εἰσαγέτω κατὰ/ τὸ ἐξῆς ἐκάστης ἀναγραφῆς ἀνακαλοῦμενος, εἰ μὴ τιςιν συγ/κεχώρηται πρῶτοις εἰσιέναι· ἐὰν δὲ ὁ ἀνακληθεὶς μὴ παρῇ, τὸν/ ἐχόμενον εἰσαγέτω, ἕως ἂν παραγένηται ὁ ἀνακληθεὶς”, “[the secretary] will introduce [the consultants] into the temple according to the order of each list, unless some people have been granted the right to get in first; if the person called is not present, he will introduce the next one, until the person called shows up.”

³⁸ As Louis Robert underlined, we cannot know if those tablets were the same than the one with the questions on them. L. Robert, “Sur l’oracle d’Apollon Koropaios,” *Ellinika: filologiko, istoriko kai laografiko periodiko syngramma*, Thessaloniki 5 (1948).

³⁹ IG IX,2 1109, l. 38-45: “καθήσθω/σαν δὲ οἱ προγεγραμμένοι ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ κοσμίως ἐν ἐσθῇσιν λαμ/πραῖς, ἐστεφανωμένοι στεφάνοις δαφνίοις, ἀγνεύοντες/ καὶ νήφοντες καὶ ἀποδεχόμενοι τὰ πινακία παρὰ τῶν μαν/τευομένων· ὅταν δὲ συντελεσθῇ τὸ μαντεῖον, ἐμβαλόν/τες εἰς ἀγγεῖον κατασφραγισάσθωσαν τῇ τε τῶν στρα/τηγῶν καὶ νομοφυλάκων σφραγίδι, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τῇ τοῦ ἱερέως καὶ ἐάτωσαν μένειν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ”, “the aforementioned will stand in the sanctuary observing the *decorum* of the situation, in splendid garments, crowned by laurels, pure and sober, receiving the tablets of those consulting the oracle. When the oracular session is over, they’ll throw them into an urn and will seal it with the seal of the *strategoí*, the *nomophylakes* and of the priest, and will let the consultants stay in the sanctuary.”

⁴⁰ IG IX,2 1109, l. 46-45: “ἄμα δὲ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ὁ γραμματεὺς τοῦ θεοῦ προσενέγκας τὸ ἀγγεῖον καὶ ἐπιδείξας τοῖς προειρημένοις τὰς σφραγίδας ἀνοίξάτω καὶ ἐκ τῆς ἀναγραφῆς ἀνακαλὼν ἐκάστοις ἀποδιδότω τὰ πινά/[κία].”, “At dawn, the secretary of the god will bring the urn, show it to the aforementioned and remove the seals. He will call the people accordingly to the list and give them back the tablets”.

of information in an archival way than to writing. But the fact he guarantees the seals' integrity confers him also the responsibility of the authenticity of the divine speech.

Being the guardian of this authenticity and the handler of the lists, the God's secretary appears here more like a specialist of the manipulation of information than of writing.

Abonoteichos & Trophonios: manipulating content and display of oracles

These features are paralleled in a much later and much controversial literary source, the *Alexander or the false prophet* by Lucian. In this satire, the man from Samosate allegedly unveiled the manipulations of written oracles that the prophet Alexander, founder of the oracular cult of Glykon, would have performed. In this sanctuary, the questions addressed to the god were indeed written on a papyrus⁴¹ that was then sealed and handed to the prophet, who gave back, the next day, the same papyrus with the answer written on it. If we put aside the biased and malevolent look Lucian cast upon this cult, we can recognize a rite very similar from the one taking place in Demetrias, except that, this time, it is the prophet who is in charge of manipulating names and archives. Maybe because the charges traditionally devoted to the secretary were seen as more strategic and honorific in the 2nd century BC have we here an absorption of them by the prominent figure of this sanctuary, that is the prophet. We could interpret the rise of the thespiod and the fall of the secretaries in Claros' inscriptions in a similar way.

But Alexander is not the only person manipulating the written oracles according to Lucian, since several agents were to help him in his task: he mentions, without further explanations, an “ὑπογραφεύς”, a “clerk”, an “ἐπισφραγιστής”, “a seal bearer”, and a “χρησιμοφύλαξ⁴²”, “a keeper of oracles”, whose job was to help the prophet in his manipulations, and also maybe in the good keeping of annals, “ὑπομνήματα⁴³”. If it hadn't been for the satirical accumulation effect of the names on the payroll of the sanctuary, those subaltern functions may have never been exposed, for their holders were too humble. From this implicit presence of assistants, we can hypothesize that the secretary's charge could then have been, in other oracular sanctuaries, much more of a supervision charge than a technical one, which would explain the fact it could be given annually.

This idea of the presence of anonymous subordinates is comforted by another parallel in the Trophonion sanctuary in Lebadea, Boeotia. Pausanias describes, in the second century AD, the mantic ritual who took place in this holy place: after a series of ritual preparations, the consultant of the oracle entered a mysterious cave where he had direct visions of the god. Disoriented after this mystic encounter, he was then questioned while sitting on the throne of Memory about his experience by priests. Finally:

“ἀνάγκη σφᾶς, ὅποσα ἤκουσεν ἕκαστος ἢ εἶδεν, ἀναθεῖναι γεγραμμένα ἐν πίνακι.”

“Obligation is made for them of consecrating on a wooden-tablet a writing of what each of them has heard or seen⁴⁴”.

If in this formula Pausanias emphasizes the fact that consultants themselves had to consecrate an account of their experience, the neutral plural passive form of “γεγραμμένα”, rather than a masculine plural active form “γεγραφότες”, seems to imply that they might not have been the ones inscribing them. Of course, this silence raises more questions than it gives solutions: did Pausanias, since he never uses the word, consider the function of secretary too unimportant or too obvious to mention it? Were people devoted to this task, such humble agents, as for

⁴¹ Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, 19.

⁴² Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, 19.

⁴³ Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, 27.

⁴⁴ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, IX, 39, 14.

example sacred slaves, that it wouldn't have occurred to Pausanias to mention them? We don't know. The only certain point is that those *ex-votos*, written systematically and on perishable materials, formed a large amount of narrative which display in the sanctuary or filing in the archives may have required someone more important than an anonymous person to organize them⁴⁵.

As a matter of fact, it would be naïve to consider that those archives were not considered as of strategic importance, in their content and display, as it is clear in both sanctuaries. The enquiry the consultants of Trophonios were subjected to by the priests, in a moment of confusion, served a double purpose: the ministers of the gods may have been eager to know the divine will, but they were also shaping by their questions the memories of the confused devotee and the subsequent narrative of his experience⁴⁶. Even with the earnest intentions, those reports of visions must have obeyed traditional patterns and be subjected to a normative control, such as the ones the Asklepieian healing stories followed as has shown Pierre Sineux⁴⁷. Priests and secretaries were, in Bruno Latour's words, more mediators than intermediaries, since they had an action on the content that couldn't be systematically predicted⁴⁸ from the vision form it had beforehand: their part was not only to record and pass on set words of the god – as intermediaries do in Latour's theory – but they shaped the consultant report into a narrative that became by this operation a suitable oracle – as mediators. Nonetheless this operation doesn't seem to have been pinpointed by the consultants.

But the manipulation of the content could also be of an opportunist nature. Lucian reports the prophet Alexander altered Glykon's prophecies when they were proved incorrect. After having predicted a victory over the Armenians to Severianus and acknowledged his defeat:

“τοῦτον μὲν τὸν χρησμὸν ἐξαίρει ἐκ τῶν ὑπομνημάτων, ἐντίθησιν δ' ἄλλον ἀντ' αὐτοῦ⁴⁹.”

“[Alexander] withdraws this oracle from the archives, and puts another in its place⁵⁰.”

This need to amend the oracles' record implies former oracles could have been consulted by other persons than the consultant after they were emitted, since in this case Severianus had ended his life after his defeat⁵¹. Lucian adds on the following chapter that this practice was not limited to the prophecies made to famous generals, but were also used in the case of inaccurate predictions made to sick people. The manipulation of oracles' archives seems then to have been peculiarly sensitive since the predictions were recorded in them before they were fulfilled and Alexander may have been helped in this task by the subordinates we've seen earlier. When this kind of incident happened in other oracular shrines, one may think that the revision of some contents was part of the secretary's attributions.

The supervision of the archive content was also linked to the display of the oracles' reports consecrated in the sanctuary and their diffusion outside of the holy place. Pausanias

⁴⁵ Those perishable archives may have been compiled in stone inscriptions, such as in therapeutic sanctuaries: P. Sineux, “Les récits de rêve dans les sanctuaires guérisseurs du monde grec: des textes sous contrôle”, *Sociétés & représentations* 7, 2007, 45-65, 49.

⁴⁶ P. Bonnechere, *Trophonios de Lébadée. Cultes et mythes d'une cité béotienne au miroir de la mentalité antique*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, Leiden: Brill, 2003, 250-253.

⁴⁷ P. Sineux, “Les récits de rêve dans les sanctuaires guérisseurs du monde grec: des textes sous contrôle”, 2007.

⁴⁸ On mediators and intermediaries: B. Latour, *Reassembling the social: an Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies, New-York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 58-59.

⁴⁹ Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, 27.

⁵⁰ Translation of the author.

⁵¹ On Severianus: Cassius Dio, *History of Rome*, 71, 2; Lucian, *How to Write History*, 21.

seems to imply that the tablets, where the visual and auditive experience of the consultants in the Trophonion in Lebadea were recorded, were exhibited among other offerings since:

“λείπεται δ’ ἔτι καὶ τοῦ Ἀριστομένους ἐνταῦθα ἡ ἀσπίς⁵²”

“Aristomenes’ shield is also displayed there”.

We can imagine that their display was not arbitrary: the most ancient or vivid reports must have been put forward in order to emphasize the power of the god and the antiquity of the cult, whereas the most damaged or irrelevant ones were discarded. Within the boundaries of the sanctuary, those prerogatives may have been attributed to the secretary of the god.

In a close but slightly different way, we see that god’s secretaries in oracular shrine could use their manipulation skills in order to control the content and display of the god’s words within the sanctuary. Once again, the writing part of the office seems to be much less important than the ability of managing and organizing information.

Argos: from a secretary to another

Two other inscriptions, found in the oracular sanctuary of Apollon Pythaeus in Argos, cast an interesting light on the sacred secretaries⁵³. Dated respectively from the 3rd and the 1st century BC, they mention a couple of “γροφέε”, secretaries, side by side with other religious functionaries such as “προμάντιες”, prophets, or a “ἱερεὺς”, a priest, leaving no doubt about the religious aspect of their office.

The first inscription is a dedicatory one, where the two prophets and the two secretaries offer Apollo a series of construction works they’ve conducted in the sanctuary. Neither the priest, nor the prophetess are mentioned here. A great part of the actions undertaken were related to the circulation and accesses in the sanctuary and concerns colonnades (“τὰν περίσταίν”), path (“ὁδὸν”), walls encircling the altar (“τοῖχον πέτρινον παρ τοῦ βωμοῦ”) or doors of the temple (“τὰς θύρας τοῦ ναοῦ”), reinforcing the idea that god’s secretaries were in charge of the consultant’s flow, as in Demetrias. The fact that they consecrate also two collection boxes (“θησαυρόν”) for the cult taxes (“τοῖς πελανοῖς”) implies that they were in charge of collecting them, and maybe of keeping a record of it as in the Amphiarraion of Oropos. Finally, it seems revealing that one of their action consists in organizing and putting in order the altars and statues of the shrine (“τὸν βωμόν ἐν τάξει πεδάγαγον”). More than toward scribing assignments, the inscription points toward organizing and flow control tasks in the beginning of the third century BC.

Two centuries later, around 92/1 BC⁵⁴, the sacred secretaries reappear in our documentation in an inscription recording an oracle given to the Messenians about the Andanian mysteries. In a vivid contrast, the eponymous magistrate of the text, who was the secretary of the Council (“γραμματεὺς τῶν συνέδρων”), is referred to in a non-dialectal way, whereas the sacred secretaries keep their title in Doric dialect (“γροφεῖς”). Moreover, the inscription informs us of the political decision of engraving (“ἀνέγραψεν”) the verse of the oracle, according to a decision of the *archontes* and the Council (“κατὰ τὸ ψάφισμα τῶν ἀρχόντων καὶ τῶν συνέδρων”). The mere fact that a city, Argos, was able to transcribe word for word an oracle given to another political entity, the Messenians, implies that this revelation had been previously recorded by the religious institution, and most likely by its secretaries, and was transferred from a sacred secretary to a political one – and maybe from a perishable support to a more enduring one. The list of the sacred agents given by the inscription would then also be there to sanction and give more credit to the transcription of the

⁵² Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, IX, 39, 14.

⁵³ SEG XVII 146 and Syll.³ 735. On these oracles, see: Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, II, 24 and M. Piérart, “Un oracle d’Apollon à Argos”, *Kernos. Revue internationale et pluridisciplinaire de religion grecque antique* 3, 1990, 319-333.

⁵⁴ SEG LIV 434.

god's words: the oracle was endorsed not only by the human agents who ritually participated to utter it, but also by those who collected and registered it, the secretaries.

Those Argian inscriptions endorse then both the ideas that gods' secretaries were in charge of recording and transmitting the oracles uttered by Apollo, but also collaborated with the prophets in controlling the sacred space and the consultants' flow in it.

Claros: was the Smyrnian Chresmologue an archive specialist?

These facts lead us to finally consider another epigraphic inscription from the Clarian sanctuary, an honorary decree for a Smyrnian chresmologue from the beginning of the 2nd century BC⁵⁵. For having achieved a good "direction" of the oracle, "προστασία τοῦ μαντείου", Menophilos, son of Philetairos, from Smyrna, introduced as a chresmologue, "ὁ χρησμολόγος", earned the honor to be crowned during the Great Claria festival as hypophet of the god, "τὸν ὑποφήτην τοῦ θεοῦ". First mention of an oracular official in Claros, this decree seems to insert itself in a context of refoundation of the oracle related to some epiphanies of Apollo some years before in the sanctuary⁵⁶. In this situation, the use of uncommon terms such as *chresmologos* and *hypophet* appears highly meaningful, especially when the terminology of the oracles' agent used in Roman times appears in another decree a decade or so later in Claros⁵⁷. Everything is pointing towards the idea that Menophilos' direction of the oracle was a way to shape its oracular ritual, using his experience as a *chresmologue* to help support the apparition of the god's words, as an hypophet – literally "the one supporting the god's utterance". Since chresmologues were independent diviners collecting oracles given by oracular sanctuaries or famous seers and interpreting these personal archives in order to predict the future⁵⁸, one may deduce that Menophilos implemented his archival skills in the Clarian ritual and that the god's secretaries managed some kind of archive in the sanctuary afterwards. The evidence here is certainly circumstantial, but since it's the only trace of a collaboration between a non-institutional diviner and an oracular institution, in a time when other oracles began to mention secretaries in their rank, this interpretation would not be strange and would be endorsed by all the previous examined examples.

Paradoxically, then, all the documents informing us about what secretaries were doing at oracular sanctuaries point to the fact that the function was much more one of supervision of archival work than one of mere writing.

Conclusion

Of course, the scarcity of the evidence, combined with the lack of a clear and explicit literary text explaining us what role secretaries were playing in oracular sanctuaries, gives our reconstruction a very hypothetical turn.

⁵⁵ SEG XLVI, 1065. L. and J. Robert, "Décret de Colophon pour un chresmologue de Smyrne appelé à diriger l'oracle de Claros", *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 116, 1992, 279-291.

⁵⁶ SEG XXXIII 973 and also Chr. Müller and Fr. Prost, "Un décret du koinon des Ioniens trouvé à Claros", *Chiron: Mitteilungen der Kommission für Alte Geschichte und Epigraphik des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 43, 2013, 93-126.

⁵⁷ SEG LVI 1227.

⁵⁸ On *chresmologoi*: A. Shapiro, "Oracle-mongers in Peisistratid Athens", *Kernos: revue internationale et pluridisciplinaire de religion grecque antique* 3, 1990, 335-345; J. Dillery, "Chresmologues and manteis: independent diviners and the problem of authority", in *Mantikê: studies in ancient divination*, S. I. Johnston and P. Struck (eds.), Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, Leiden: Brill, 2005, 167-231; M. Flowers, *The seer in ancient Greece*, Berkeley: University of California, 2008, 60-66.

Nonetheless, all our sources seem to converge towards the idea that god's secretaries shared more than a mere part of an *amanuensis* and were supposed to manage a team of lower-rank technicians, a pledge of continuity when the secretary's charge was often annual. The oracles were not only to be written, they were also to be preserved and retrieved when necessary, in order to give the sanctuaries the power to mobilize this divine knowledge, for its own promotion or more political collaborations. This function is then the most reliable piece of evidence for the existence of archives in Greek oracular sanctuaries, which have often been implied by the presence of an oracles' collection, such as the one Gorgos of Claros compiled⁵⁹. It would also particularly well fit the idea that Roman Imperial power tried to control this kind of knowledge, as would reveal the massive destruction of prophetic books by Augustus⁶⁰.

Finally, a diachronic dynamic, that may have paralleled retrieval and literacy progresses, seems to emerge from those pieces of evidence: after a Classical era where the part of secretary may have been shaped by the political institutions of the city, secretaries may have joined oracular sanctuaries in the Hellenistic times, first as anonymous specialists accompanying the rise of the new sanctuaries, as in Didyma, then as honoured agents controlling a growing stock of divine speeches, as in Claros. The fact that the title appeared during the 3rd and 2nd century BC in Argos, Claros, Didyma and Demetrias is most likely more than a mere coincidence and matches an important series of oracles' renewal in the same period. Eventually, those prerogatives may have been considered important enough to be conflated, in a more or less extended way, with lifelong priesthood, such as those of prophet in Abonoteichos or thespiod in Claros, and carried more and more honours to their carrier. Unfortunately, those sacred archives may have had too much authority not to challenge the secular authority of the emperor and the spiritual one of the Christian church, leading to its own disappearance: for having been the keepers of the god's memory, his archives and secretaries fell to a partial oblivion.

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⁵⁹ J.-L. Ferrary, *Les mémoriaux de délégations du sanctuaire oraculaire de Claros*, 83.

⁶⁰ Suetonius, *The Twelve Cesars*, XXXI. The fact that the predictions destroyed were "*nullis vel parum idoneis auctoribus*", "with no or no proper authors", imply that some came from authorized institutions and were thus not destroyed.