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The stuff of the gods

The material aspects of religion
in ancient Greece

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ABSTRACT

The “material turn” in the humanities and social sciences has brought about an expanded understanding of the material dimension of all cultural and social phenomena. In the Classics it has resulted in the breaking down of boundaries within the discipline and a growing interest in materiality within literature. In the study of religion cross-culturally new perspectives are emphasising religion as a material phenomenon and belief as a practice founded in the material world. This volume brings together experts in all aspects of Greek religion to consider its material dimensions. Chapters cover both themes traditionally approached by archaeologists, such as dedications and sacred space, and themes traditionally approached by philologists, such as the role of objects in divine power. They include a wide variety of themes ranging from the imminent material experience of religion for ancient Greek worshippers to the role of material culture in change and continuity over the long term.

Keywords: Greek religion, Etruscan religion, Mycenaean religion, materiality, religious change, *temenos*, temples, offerings, cult statues, terracottas, *omphalos*, cauldrons, sacred laws, visuality, purity, pollution, gods' identities, divine power, inscribed dedications

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16. Delphi and the *Omphalos*

Materiality, replication and the mythistory of the Sanctuary of Apollo

Abstract

The *omphalos* embodied the notion of Delphi as the religious nexus of the Greek world. The concept worked on at least two different scales: at one level, it served as a *pars pro toto* metaphor for the whole sanctuary of Apollo (e.g. as used by Pindar in *Pythian 6*); at another level, the *omphalos* was a discrete object in itself that is generally thought to have been on display inside Apollo's temple. At this concrete level, it would then seem that the *omphalos* offers us an intriguing example of how sacred geography could be translated into material form, an act of translation that poses some important questions that have often been glossed over or only treated in a cursory fashion. For example, at which point in its history did the *omphalos* become a thing? It is unlikely that we will ever be able to pinpoint the exact moment of the invention of the concept of the *omphalos*, but more positively, what we can do is to study how the story of the *omphalos* was constructed and put to use across time and in different contexts.*

Keywords: Delphi, omphalos, ancient Greece, sacred geography, replication, mythistory

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Introduction

The *omphalos* or navel at Delphi is in equal measures one of the most iconic and most enigmatic monuments of ancient Greece. As metaphor, it was routinely linked to the sanctuary of Apollo's claim to the title of being the centre of the world,

and as "stuff", it was widely represented in texts and images.¹ In light of this prominence, modern scholarship has arguably made both too little and too much of the *omphalos*. While many publications on Delphi explicitly refer to the sanctuary's centrality in their titles, the significance of the *omphalos* and its implications for Greek sacred geography are repeatedly overlooked, frequently using the concept itself as little more than a scholarly cliché.² Other scholars have conversely made too much of the *omphalos* by placing it within sweeping surveys of the Greek *kosmos*. Notably, the *omphalos* takes a leading role in Jean Richer's *Géographie sacrée du monde grec*.³ Based on his work on ancient esotericism and astrology, Richer suggested that Greek sacred geography was defined by a series of "Great Alignments" with Delphi and the *omphalos* as a particularly important focal point. It is fair to say that this way of conceptualising and even mapping the sacred landscape would have been alien to many if not all ancient Greeks.

More broadly speaking, the navel of Delphi poses numerous interpretive problems that remain unsatisfactorily answered. These problems include the origins of the *omphalos*, its symbolic significance (both in and outside Delphi), and even its identification in the first place.⁴ For example, how do we identify a specific stone as the *omphalos* mentioned by ancient texts? As we shall see in the second part of this chapter, this fundamental issue has posed a recurring challenge for the French excavators of the Delphic sanctuary. The identification of the *omphalos* in visual culture is in many cases equally difficult and will not be attempted in any detail here, but it is clear

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¹ Many of these are usefully compiled in fundamental works, such as Roscher 1915; Herrmann 1959.

² Vout 2012 makes a similar point in the case of the hills of Rome.

³ Richer 1967, published in English in 1994; for a review of Richer's methodology, see Ziolkowski 1997.

⁴ See also the specific observations in Kindt 2013 and the broader methodological discussion in Hall 2014.

that discussions of such representations often become circular as scholars sometimes see any rounded object as an *omphalos* of some kind or another.

This short chapter aims to re-assess the significance of the *omphalos* from a new perspective. It pursues a decidedly “bottom-up” approach, in stark contrast to the “top-down” perspective so integral to Richer’s argument and those of other prominent scholars that have discussed the *omphalos* as part of a broader cosmovision or a component of “primitive” religion. So this is an attempt not to define an overarching system or pattern in the Greek sacred landscape, but rather to explore how the Greeks themselves inscribed (sometimes conflicting) meanings into particular configurations of the sacred by means of oral tradition, texts and monuments, the totality of which I shall be referring to here as mythistory, a term borrowed from the work of the Israeli historian Joseph Mali in reference to a particular synthesis of history and myth that is crucial in terms of how communities define themselves.⁵ I argue that this approach is useful in uncovering some of the many converging layers embedded within the story of the *omphalos* and in demonstrating some of the complexity of how the sanctuary of Apollo represented itself to and within the Greek world, even though many questions will ultimately remain only incompletely answered.

The chapter focuses on two significant issues in the mythistory of the *omphalos*: firstly, its ontological status, with particular focus on how this was articulated by Greek and Roman authors; and, secondly, its replication as a *thing* inside the sanctuary. These issues are especially relevant in the context of the present volume in the sense that they both shed light on how the powerful concept of the navel of the earth moved back and forth between the fields of metaphor and matter.

The *Omphalos* between metaphor and matter

Since the late 19th century, numerous prominent scholars, including several members of the so-called “Cambridge Ritualists”, have intensively discussed the long-term religious history of the Delphic *omphalos* and its perceived roots in cults and rituals.⁶ Just before the turn of the century, and drawing on a typically rich and varied palette of evidence, Jane Harrison pioneered the study of the *omphalos*, which she interpreted as a primordial tomb with a “fetish stone” on top that was used in the cult of ghosts (*Erinyes* or furies) and earth spirits, later

associated with Gaia and Kronos.⁷ Harrison’s take was soon followed by further research by her Cambridge colleague, Arthur Bernard Cook, who published the encyclopaedic, three-volume *Zeus—A study in ancient religion* between 1914 and 1925. Cook identified what he claimed to be prototypical *omphaloi*, using a combination of etymological, archaeological and ethnographic sources.⁸ Similarly, in a study published in 1959, the German scholar Hans-Volkmar Herrmann emphasised what he believed to be the *omphalos*’ archaic traits and long tradition within pre-Greek cults, relating it in particular to the worship of chthonic deities.⁹ The *omphalos*, imagined as a tumulus-like tomb, resonates with several vase depictions, in which the earth from which it was made appears to have underlined the religious significance of the thing itself.

The perceived deep-rooted antiquity of the *omphalos* has continued to hold its ground in more contemporary and still-influential scholarship, such as Walter Burkert’s interpretation of Delphic rituals. Here, Burkert suggested that the *omphalos* marked the centre of the earth by being the place where the sacrifices of ritual restoration were undertaken, mirroring the practices of hunters going back to the Palaeolithic.¹⁰ Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood saw in the *omphalos* a special connection between Apollo’s cult at Delphi and its earlier incarnations on Crete, going back to the 8th century BC and in light of the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*’s account of how the sanctuary’s first priests came from the island.¹¹ New finds are occasionally interpreted within this framework. For example, in 2009, John Younger returned to the *omphalos* as an example of a cultural tradition that he traced back to the 2nd millennium BC, citing the evidence of Minoan and Mycenaean sacred stones found in various archaeological excavations, such as Phylakopi on Melos.¹²

However, the degree to which the *omphalos* can be classified as a sacred stone is debatable, as its importance was typically tied to place rather than divine presence, as we shall see later.¹³ Furthermore, even when accepting the similarities in appearance between certain baetyls and the *omphalos*, there is in most cases a considerable gap to fill between the supposedly sacred stones of the 2nd millennium BC and the later Delphic tradition of a navel as the centre of the world (as is indeed also the case in many other aspects of early Greek cult). This is true even if we accept that there is a connection between a baetylic cult of Apollo and the 8th century BC shrine at Kommos that

⁵ Mali 2003.

⁶ The modern literature on the topic is indeed vast, and the following represents only a selection.

⁷ Harrison 1899, 206, 225–251; 1903; 1963, 396–406.

⁸ Cook 1925, 166–178.

⁹ Herrmann 1959.

¹⁰ Burkert 1983, 126–127.

¹¹ Sourvinou-Inwood 1991, 226–227; and see Kron 1995.

¹² Younger 2009. On the *omphalos* as baetyl, see also Herrmann 1959, 25–30.

¹³ See also Gaifman 2012, 59, n. 37, placing the *omphalos* in a different category than sacred stones.

contained three stone pillars of a type that is usually associated with Phoenicia.¹⁴ Certainly, these pillars typically look very different from the later *omphalos* stones from Delphi. Rather than assuming that there existed deep, long-term continuities, I prefer to refrain from presenting a teleological sketch of the origins and development of the *omphalos*. Instead, this section will investigate the deeper-lying tension between metaphor and matter that is evident from how the *omphalos* was put to use as a symbol of Apollo's sanctuary (constituting a significant first "turn" in its history that could alternatively be labelled as its textual "invention"). Furthermore, we have already seen that the material of the *omphalos* could vary—from an earthen tumulus (tomb) to stone. Particular attention will be given to how this interpretive "gap" was framed by Greek and Roman authors. How did they interpret the relationship between the concept of the navel and its material representation(s) in the sanctuary at Delphi?

The first question that presents itself in this context is why Delphi came to be described as the navel of the earth in the first place. Why was this particular metaphor considered to be appropriate and meaningful? Firstly, it must be noted that the concept itself was not exclusive to Delphi, as it was also used in other areas of Greek geography, and by other sanctuaries. Pindar calls the altar of the twelve gods in the Athenian Agora the *omphalos* of the *asty*, in this fashion applying the concept in a less specific, more universalising mode.¹⁵ Furthermore, ancient medical writers, such as Rufus of Ephesus, occasionally defined the navel as the middle of the belly, pointing to its potentially broader meaning in the conceptualisation of the human body.¹⁶ In the late 4th century AD, Libanius could even refer to the mid-point of the island in the Orontes River in his home city of Antioch as an *omphalos*, hinting at the commonality of the notion among many ancient audiences to simply mean any central place.¹⁷ In these cases, an actual stone was not required.

Fundamentally, the notion of the *omphalos* as the centre of the earth uses the human body as a model for the *oikoumene*, thereby downsizing worldly geography to a human scale. This phenomenon is by no means limited to ancient Greece, but is also observable in Semitic and Indian mythology, as well as in other cultures and religions.¹⁸ This partially accounts for why the *omphalos* was so appealing to many 20th century scholars

of comparative religious studies, such as Mircea Eliade.¹⁹ In Eliade's work, it is also noted that in the case of Delphi, the navel co-existed with a related bodily metaphor, since the name of the sanctuary itself may have come from *δελφύς* (womb).²⁰ This metaphor potentially defined the place of the sanctuary in the Greek sacred geography in a rather different fashion (by using a metaphor that explicitly references the anatomy of the female body), and has occasionally been interpreted as a relic from the earliest history of the sanctuary, when it was home to the earth goddess Ge.²¹ However, as Harrison has already noted, there are generally limits to how far linguistics can be pushed to understand the history of the sanctuary, given that *ὀμφαλός* seems first to have referred more broadly to any protrusion from a surface rather than a specific part of the human body.²² The concept of Delphi as womb certainly did not come to play any role in the self-representation of the sanctuary, where the *omphalos* reigned supreme.²³

The *omphalos* placed Apollo's sanctuary on the map on at least two different scales. At one level, it served as a *pars pro toto* metaphor for the whole sanctuary (and thus not any particular place within it). This is, for example, how the term *omphalos* is used by Pindar in *Pythian* 6, which tells of a procession to the "enshrined navel" of the earth, thus referring to the sanctuary as such.²⁴ At another level, the *omphalos* referred to a single object kept in the sanctuary. Based on analysis of mid-to-late 4th century BC temple accounts, it has been suggested that an *omphalos* was displayed in a *naiskos* in the *adyton* of the Temple of Apollo, although other scholars have argued that it was instead located in the *opisthodomos*.²⁵

While the mythological backstory to account for the significance of the stone itself could be disputed (as we shall see below), the *omphalos* appeared on Delphi's coins and on official decrees set up in the sanctuary. Together with the lyre and the tripod, it was among the chief iconographical attributes of Apollo, who could occasionally be represented as seated on the navel itself.²⁶ The central place of the *omphalos* on a series of relief-decorated decree *stelai* reveals one aspect of how the

¹⁴ Melfi 2013, 359–361.

¹⁵ Pind. fr. 75.3, with commentary in Cole 2004, 76, and Neer & Kurke 2014.

¹⁶ Gersh 2012, 52.

¹⁷ Lib., *Orat.* 11.204, and see Downey 1959, 675.

¹⁸ On the *omphalos* in Judaism, see Terrien 1970 and Alexander 1997 (who suggests that references to Jerusalem as the navel of the earth were borrowed from contemporary Greek authors).

¹⁹ See Eliade 1958, 231–235, 374–379.

²⁰ Eliade 1978, 21.

²¹ Paus. 10.5.5. Alternatively, the name may have been a response to a particular feature in the natural landscape which was interpreted as a navel.

²² Harrison 1963, 396.

²³ Nonetheless, Rigoglioso 2009 pushed the case for female fertility at Delphi even further, suggesting that the *omphalos* represented an "extremely pregnant belly" (Rigoglioso 2009, 184). This idea was first proposed in Delcourt 1955, 145, and cited with approval by Richer 1994, 57.

²⁴ Pindar repeatedly refers to Delphi in this way simply as the *ὀμφαλός*, see Rutherford 2001, 178, 393–395, and Eckermann 2014, esp. 23–35.

²⁵ On the inscriptions, see Bousquet 1989, 92 (= *Corpus des inscriptions de Delphes* II 49 AI, dated c. 340 BC) and 119 (= *Corpus des inscriptions de Delphes* II 62 IIB, dated c. 335 BC). For further discussion of this evidence, see Amandry 1993, 263–276, and Cole 2004, 74, n. 59.

²⁶ See examples in Zagdoun 1977, 57–60.

community of Delphi was making use of the symbolic capital that was embodied in this image.²⁷ In one of these cases, it is particularly noteworthy that the *omphalos* was chosen to illustrate a *proxenia* decree.²⁸ Through such representations that propagated knowledge of its appearance and significance beyond the relatively small number of people with access to the *adyton*, the *omphalos* came to play a crucial role in underpinning the religious authority of both city and sanctuary.

However, Greek and Roman authors presented rather different accounts of the Delphic *omphalos*, complicating the story presented so far in significant ways. Writing during the reign of Augustus, Strabo provides in his geographical survey of the *oikoumene* the fullest and most frequently cited account, in which he explicitly refers to Pindar as his source for the mythological backstory to the navel. He tells readers that Delphi is: “believed to be in the centre of the inhabited world, and people called it the navel of the earth, in addition fabricating a myth, which is told by Pindar, that the two eagles (some say crows) which had been set free by Zeus met there, one coming from the west and the other from the east. There is also a kind of navel to be seen in the temple; it is draped with fillets, and on it are the two likenesses of the birds of the myth.”²⁹ The first part of the passage explicitly addresses the geography of the sanctuary and uses the concept of the *omphalos* to describe its place in the Greek world, although there is some scepticism as to the validity of the claim of the sanctuary to centrality (as well as the authority of Pindar). The second part focuses specifically on the thing, the *omphalos* itself, which is simply treated as a depiction or illustration of the myth of the two eagles (alternatively crows), although Strabo does give us some interesting information about how the navel might have been decorated. However, any link between the myth and the object itself is not commented upon in any significant detail.

In Plutarch, writing in the 1st century AD and himself a priest of Apollo at Delphi, philosophical scrutiny of the place of the sanctuary in the world serves as a lens through which to explore the relationship between religion and science, and between observable and unobservable phenomena. One of his *Moralia* begins with a very short account of essentially the same story as Strabo’s, except that this time it is eagles and swans that are mentioned as the birds flying from opposite ends of the earth to locate its centre.³⁰ It then proceeds with an account of how the philosopher Epimenides of Phaistos, back in the 6th century BC, had asked the oracle whether the

notion of the *omphalos* held any truth. The response that he received, according to Plutarch, was ambiguous, but Epimenides nonetheless concluded that, “there is no mid-*omphalos* of either earth or ocean / Yet if there is, it is known to the gods, but is hidden from mortals.”³¹ His conclusion serves as a prologue to a contemporary parallel when two travellers set out from each corner of the world to meet up at Delphi, beginning respectively in Britain and some unspecified point beyond the Persian Gulf.³² The story discusses scales of scientific inquiry (warning us not to “paint the lion from a single claw”); in addition, there is no mention of the *omphalos* as a thing on display in the sanctuary. Admittedly, Plutarch’s use of the *omphalos* is much more complex than what we observed in Strabo’s relatively straightforward account, and demonstrates how the concept could be evoked rhetorically in a philosophical argument that showed rather little interest in the materiality of the thing itself.

In contrast, the periegetic author Pausanias, writing up his tours of Greece in the late 2nd century AD, was generally very interested in the materiality of individual monuments.³³ In the section of his book dedicated to Delphi, he mentions the *omphalos* and tells us that it is made of a white stone (λίθου λευκού), once again citing Pindar as the source of the story that it marked the centre of the earth.³⁴ However, the relationship between the concept and the thing is not commented upon. The most striking aspect of the passage is in fact how little attention is actually given to the *omphalos*, in spite of its apparent importance as a marker of sacred geography, not least when compared with the many other monuments that Pausanias came upon in the sanctuary, of which he offers a much more detailed treatment. It could be argued that the simple stone was not the sort of thing that necessarily appealed to Pausanias’ narrative or his art historical sensibilities (even if, in other cases, he does show considerable interest in aniconic objects). However, it is nonetheless interesting that he does not devote more space to explaining any significance that the *omphalos* might have held in ritual matters, which are otherwise a key interest of his.³⁵ In the landscape of Delphi as constructed by Pausanias, the *omphalos* was just one small item on a very long list of objects on display in the sanctuary.

The sources for the *omphalos* that we have discussed so far, stretching in time from the 1st century BC to the 2nd century AD, have all evoked the birds (be it eagles, crows or even swans) sent out by Zeus to find the centre of the earth.

²⁷ *Guide de Delphes, Le musée* 1991, 123–124, figs. 90–91; with fuller discussion in Zagdoun 1977, 49–57, no. 14 (with several comparanda), and 57–60, no. 15.

²⁸ Zagdoun 1977, 49–57, no. 14.

²⁹ Str. 9.3.6, transl. Jones (Loeb).

³⁰ Plut. *Mor.* 409c.

³¹ Plut. *Mor.* 409f, transl. modified from the Loeb edition (Babbitt). Fontenrose 1978, 290, Q66, classifies it as a “not genuine” oracular response.

³² See also Hirsch-Luipold 2014, 173–174.

³³ See Stewart 2013 on approaches to Pausanias in Classical archaeology.

³⁴ Paus. 10.16.3. More broadly on Pausanias’ “construction” of Greek landscapes, see Hutton 2005.

³⁵ Elsner 2001.

Doubt, uncertainty and even outright scepticism of the claim to centrality (and the mythological backstory to support it) are repeated on several occasions. Moreover, other traditions of the *omphalos* defined Delphi's place in the Greek world in a radically different way by interpreting the thing itself as a tomb and thus inspiring many of the interpretations discussed above. For example, the Roman antiquarian Varro (116–27 BC), in a passage that gives an etymology of the Latin *umbilicus*, informs us that the *omphalos* marked the burial place of Python, the snake creature that had inhabited Delphi before the arrival of Apollo.³⁶ Varro again demonstrates considerable scepticism of the concept of a sacred centre point (noting that the *omphalos* did not mark the centre of the earth, and nor is the navel the middle point of the human body); however, it fits well with the fact that in art the *omphalos* was occasionally depicted as encircled by a snake.³⁷ As noted earlier, this was central to Harrison's interpretation of the *omphalos*. The decoration of the stone could, in this context, also be interpreted as similar to the ribbons and flowers that adorned many funerary monuments on, for example, Athenian white-ground *lekythoi*. The funerary interpretation is repeated in a work by the 2nd century AD Christian author Tatian that identifies the *omphalos* as the tomb of Dionysos, who shared the sanctuary at Delphi with Apollo.³⁸ The conception of the *omphalos* as tomb, regardless of to whom it was considered to belong, tied it to a different configuration of myth and ritual topography much more closely associated with the underground, even though it does not entirely rule out that it could have had another function as a marker of sacred geography.

The fact that the *omphalos* could readily be interpreted as navel or tomb allowed a considerable degree of fluidity in its origins, mythological backstory and ritual significance. Unsurprisingly, the authority of Pindar was frequently evoked, although not always with approval. Each interpretation of the *omphalos* then emphasised the importance of Delphi in slightly different ways: some related to Zeus, others to Dionysos and Python, tying each individual deity in distinctive ways to the landscape of the sanctuary and its mythistory. This interpretive “gap” was not only exploited by Greek and Roman authors in order to give different spins to their narratives of Delphic centrality; it also allowed the sanctuary of Apollo to present several different mythical discourses of its place in sacred geography that were all equally “true” and significant to visiting pilgrims.³⁹ This was by no means unique to this single

aspect of Delphic cult, as there were also several prevalent narratives of the foundation of the Pythia.⁴⁰

The ambivalent and fluid form of the *omphalos* itself was thus very much part of its aura and attraction (in antiquity as well as today). The case of Plutarch even showed that the story of the *omphalos* could be used as a lens enabling philosophical engagement with the nature of scientific inquiry on a much larger scale. Furthermore, it is clear that some of the discourses pertaining to the navel related to the materiality of the *omphalos* in a direct fashion (by interpreting it as a tomb, mentioning the white stone from which it was made or its decoration), whereas others only paid attention to its significance as a conceptual metaphor that placed Delphi within the broader sacred geography of Greece.

Replicating the *Omphalos*

Moving now to a second “turn” in the history of the *omphalos*, we shall consider another aspect of its materiality, namely its replication.⁴¹ It is an under-appreciated fact that the French team at Delphi, since the beginning of their fieldwork in 1892, have located more than one *omphalos* stone, all varying in material, size and degree of decoration. This multiplicity of *omphaloi*, and the fact that none of them was immediately identifiable as the one that was on display in the Temple of Apollo, have prevented the French excavators from claiming an alleged “original” as a trophy of their considerable scholarly efforts. The most widely-known *omphalos* is made of Pentelic marble and now takes pride of place in the Delphi Museum (*Fig. 1*). It was found in several fragments on the eastern terrace of the Temple of Apollo between 18 May and 4 July 1894.⁴² Among the French excavators, it is generally considered to be a Hellenistic or Roman “replica” of the *omphalos* kept inside the *adyton*, and they occasionally refer to it as “une oeuvre médiocre”,⁴³ in turn revealing some of their own expectations and preconceptions of how the “original” *omphalos* would have appeared. The tightly bound fillets of the Delphi Museum *omphalos* bring to mind Strabo's description, and there have been speculations as to how images of two birds might have fitted onto it.⁴⁴

³⁶ Varro, *Ling.* 7.17.

³⁷ For some examples, see Herrmann 1959, 39–52. The motif is also relatively common in Roman wall painting.

³⁸ Tatianus, *Ad. Gr.* 8. It should be noted that the context of this passage is strongly anti-pagan rhetoric.

³⁹ This argument follows Eade & Sallnow 1991, 10.

⁴⁰ These are discussed by Davies 2007, and see in general Scott 2014, 36, on the conflicting origins of many aspects of Delphic cult.

⁴¹ Research on replication began with Deleuze 1968. In art history in particular, the issue has received renewed interest in recent years. See, for example, Davis 1996 and Trimble & Elsner 2006, with further papers in that special issue of *Art History*.

⁴² Amandry 1992, 181.

⁴³ Roux 1976, 131.

⁴⁴ The stone has been linked to a pavement block that is assumed to have been part of the *adyton* floor (and which is still on display close to the



Fig. 1. The marble omphalos in the Delphi Museum.
Photograph: Troels Myrup Kristensen.



Fig. 2. The small limestone omphalos as displayed on the "Sacred Way".
Photograph: Troels Myrup Kristensen.

This was not the first *omphalos* to be discovered at Delphi, however. One year earlier than the discovery of the marble version, on 13 June 1893, another so-called replica had been found close to the Athenian treasury along the Sacred Way, where it is still on display today (Fig. 2).⁴⁵ This simple, undecorated and cone-shaped *omphalos* is made from local limestone and presents very little that would allow any kind of meaningful dating on stylistic grounds. Its findspot, humble materials and simple form again quickly assigned it to the category of a "copy" that could have been shown to "common" visitors to the sanctuary. In comparison with the marble *omphalos* in the museum, its shape is rather more pointed; furthermore, it has not been given any form of carved decoration, although it could have been adorned with garlands or other perishable items that would have turned it into a more eye-catching object. Today it is a fixture of many photo opportunities in a location that marks a welcome resting point for tourists before they make the final ascent to the Temple of Apollo.

A third *omphalos*, also made of limestone and considerably smaller than the first two, was then found some twenty years later in September 1913. Although the circumstances of its discovery are anything but clear, it was seemingly found beneath the Temple of Apollo in the general area of the *adyton*,

exactly where we assume the original *omphalos* to have been. While hardly making much of an impression when seen in isolation, this third Delphic *omphalos* was hailed by Cook as one of the "most brilliant archaeological discoveries of our time".⁴⁶ The French excavator Fernand Courby dated a mysterious inscription on its surface to the 7th century BC, which would have made it an intriguing candidate for the original *omphalos*, which goes some way towards explaining Cook's excitement. As this stone has a hole through its middle, Cook interpreted it as holding a kind of pillar on top. In this way, Cook could use the miniature *omphalos* as evidence of the interpretation of the *omphalos* as connected to the sky (with Zeus as the thunder god). In contrast, in his equally imaginative discussion of the mantic mechanism at Delphi, Leicester Holland interpreted this hole as a crucial element in the ritual staging of the Pythian oracle.⁴⁷ He suggested that the hole through the *omphalos* had once emanated vapour containing hashish, barley and laurel from an underground chamber beneath the temple, providing the required divinatory inspiration for the oracle.

Sadly, later scholarship has been less enthusiastic and altogether less imaginative in its approach to this third *omphalos*. After the Second World War, the *omphalos* and its inscription were re-examined, and it is now widely regarded as an object of modern date. The blade of the iron knife that cuts through

Temple of Apollo). See de Boer 2007, 93–94. Alternatively, the top of the *omphalos* may have acted as a support for the eagles.

⁴⁵ Amandry 1992, 200. This *omphalos* is further investigated by archaeometric methods in Kuchel 2010 (assuming it to be the "main" *omphalos* at Delphi).

⁴⁶ Cook 1925, 177.

⁴⁷ Holland 1933, and see now de Boer 2007.

the *omphalos* and which sticks out of its top was inscribed with the year 1860, providing damning evidence of its more recent history. A photograph in the collection of the French School, dating to around 1949, shows it literally at the height of its fame, when for some time it was placed on top of the marble *omphalos* inside the Delphi Museum.⁴⁸ It has since disappeared, further adding to the mystery that has clouded the study of this object. Even though the stone is much earlier than the knife, it is not certain that it can be identified as an *omphalos* that was on display in the sanctuary.

While these stories of discovery and initial scholarly excitement (often only to be followed by considerable frustration) are fascinating in their own right, the multiplicity of Delphic *omphaloi* raises two more general points. The first point concerns why there should be more than one *omphalos* in the first place. This question is also relevant to many other aspects of the visual culture of ancient sanctuaries, such as sculptures and votive offerings that reproduce a particular form again and again, even when using different materials and framing devices.⁴⁹ To what degree were such objects interchangeable? And if they were not, in what ways were they perceived as different? In short, can we say anything about how the relationship between different replicas was conceptualised and understood by Greek viewers? Did it matter to an ancient pilgrim that the *omphalos* that he encountered along the path up to the Temple of Apollo was not the “real” thing (to the extent that this existed), but a “replica”? The modern literature has referred to the limestone replications as pilgrims’ *omphaloi*; however, this interpretation and terminology is hardly sufficient. Not least of all, the fact that they were clearly on display inside the sanctuary means that they were not mere copies available for viewing for those without the status or means to consult the oracle.⁵⁰ The fact that they differ in shape, size and elaboration further underlines the suggestion that they served different functions within the ritual landscape of Delphi. The fluidity of myth that came up in the previous discussion of the introduction of the *omphalos* also comes out in the issue of replication: different versions did not diminish the aura of an object, but rather added to it, enabling other “mythhistories” and narratives to unfold.

The second point that I want to make here concerns how both similarity and difference could be achieved through the materials chosen for the different *omphaloi* that were on display in the sanctuary. In an analogous case to our multiple *omphaloi*, Pausanias demonstrates a keen interest in materiality in his famous account of the building phases of the Temple of Apollo. These phases begin with a temple made of laurel,

then one made of bees-wax and feathers, followed by bronze and stone.⁵¹ In this passage, Pausanias explored how different materials could be used to demonstrate the age and authority of Delphi’s most important temple. It is worth remarking here that knowledge of the mythological building history of the Temple of Apollo was not restricted to Pausanias, but was known to several other authors.⁵² Aristotle makes reference to the feathered and bronze temples, as does in part Strabo, who calls the “winged” phase a myth.⁵³ What is interesting here is not only the scepticism inherent in these texts, but also the fact that knowledge of the building phases was apparently widespread. The phases (and their different materialities) clearly had particular resonance in several different contexts in the Greek world and were part of a potent tradition of how the history of the sanctuary was told and re-told across time and space, even though it was not always accepted. As such, they constitute an example of what we may term Greek mythistory in Mali’s sense.⁵⁴

Far from dusty and irrelevant myths (of interest only to antiquarians, such as Pausanias), the phases of the Temple of Apollo were crucial to the self-perception of the Delphic sanctuary and constituted an essential part of its mythistory that in turn could be contested by contemporary authors. A similar link between materiality and the antiquity of the sanctuary of Delphi is found in a fragmentary paean by Pindar that gives an account of the building history of the Temple of Apollo.⁵⁵ This is the only poem of its kind from Greece, and Ian Rutherford has suggested that it may have been displayed in the sanctuary, thus providing visitors with an account of the temple’s history, no doubt authorised and promoted by the amphictyony.⁵⁶ However, the fact that Pausanias (and much later archaeologists) dispute individual building phases did not detract from the authority of the sanctuary or its perceived antiquity. On the contrary, it added significant layers to a deep mythistory that linked the present with the past in complex ways.

Multiple copies and different episodes of replication, both mythical and historical, are also found in another well-known case from Delphi: the mysterious E-shaped symbol that was seemingly displayed on the Temple of Apollo’s façade and which is depicted in both coinage and the occasional textual

⁴⁸ de Boer 2007, fig. 2.

⁴⁹ Trimble 2011.

⁵⁰ See also Gaifman 2006.

⁵¹ Paus. 10.5.9–13. Scholarship has generally paid too little attention to the fact that Pausanias also rules out other claims about the phasing of the temple. For instance, he is not persuaded by the suggestion that another incarnation of the temple was made from fern, nor that the bronze temple (the third phase in archaeological terms) was made by Hephaistos himself.

⁵² For a full overview of the sources, see Rutherford 2001, 231–232.

⁵³ See Rutherford 2001, 232.

⁵⁴ Mali 2003.

⁵⁵ Fragment B2, see Rutherford 2001, 210–231.

⁵⁶ Rutherford 2001, 214.

reference. Famously, the meaning of this symbol was discussed in another of Plutarch's *Moralia* that touches on many of the issues that are under discussion here: namely, the complex relationship between history and tradition, and between myth and truth.⁵⁷ Like the *omphalos*, this symbol can be seen as an embodiment of the concept of unknowability in any engagement with the gods. Plutarch tells us that three such E-symbols were on display, each in a different material and each connected with a particular dedicator. The original was made of wood and associated with five "Wise Men".⁵⁸ The second was presented by the Athenians and made of bronze, and, finally, the third was made of gold and dedicated by the Roman empress Livia. Each replication was thus not only a material upgrade (in the sense of the value that it represented); it also added new elements to the mythistory of this mysterious symbol, the object on which it was inscribed, and the story of its replication.

I would suggest that the multiple *omphaloi* played a similar function in the ritual landscape of the sanctuary. The rich decoration with tightly bound fillets makes the marble *omphalos* particularly intriguing as it gives us an image of "frozen" ritual that resonates with Strabo's account, and also brings to mind the treatment of the Kronos stone mentioned by Pausanias, which was anointed and covered by wool during festivals.⁵⁹ The round shape of our *omphaloi* meant that they could be viewed from all sides, pointing to a potentially significant performative function. In any ritual of which they may have been part, the *omphaloi* would quite literally have been the centre point, effectively creating a circular space around them.⁶⁰ In this light, it is interesting to note the most recent reconstruction of *La colonne des danseuses* by members of the French team.⁶¹ Here, the marble *omphalos* is placed on top of the column that is topped with large-scale images of the three eponymous dancing girls. The two monuments are now displayed next to each other in the Delphi Museum, although not all scholars accept that they belong together. However, if the interpretation is accepted, the tall column crowned by the marble *omphalos* would have been one of the most prominent and visible monuments in the sanctuary. For visitors approaching Delphi, it certainly would have been the ultimate embodiment of Pindar's metaphor of the enshrined navel as the goal of procession from Athens. As such, it also pointed to the *omphalos* that was kept inside the temple. Although much

less monumental, the limestone *omphalos* served a similar function by directing pilgrims on their path to the centre of the Greek world.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the *omphalos* and its role in Delphi in two different senses: firstly, as a concept of sacred geography that placed Apollo's sanctuary at the centre of the ancient Greek world; secondly, as a thing on display within the sanctuary that materialised this notion. The focus has been on two distinct "turns" in the mythistory of the *omphalos*, following the trajectory from metaphor to matter, and from (admittedly unidentifiable) prototype to replica. Both episodes contain an element of friction between the concept and the thing. On one level, the *omphalos* was simply a geographical trope that expressed the religious authority of Apollo and his sanctuary. We can even speculate that it may have been invented in the early history of the sanctuary in order to promote its Panhellenic ambitions. However, on another level, it was translated into a single object with a particular mythistory and decisions were made about the choice of materials, size and decoration that were used to represent a whole series of different claims to religious authority. I have argued here that these choices were significant and are important for our understanding of the self-representation of the sanctuary. The histories of the concept and the thing were thus clearly intertwined, although not necessarily always aligned. Even when building on traditions and explicitly referring back to earlier authorities (especially Pindar), each textual, visual or material representation of the *omphalos* constituted a re-invention of the thing itself that in subtle ways could emphasise different aspects of the powerful concept of the navel of the earth.

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⁵⁷ Plut. *Mor.* 384–394.

⁵⁸ Plut. *Mor.* 385f–386a.

⁵⁹ Paus. 10.24.6, sometimes confused with the *omphalos*, but see Gaifman 2012, 58.

⁶⁰ The significance of such circular spaces has recently been discussed by Wescoat 2012. On Delphi as a place of gathering, see also Aurigny 2020.

⁶¹ Martínez 1997; Thibault & Martínez 2013.

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