STUDIA HERCYNIA XXIX/1, 61–74

The Road Network of Ancient Delphi and the Myth of the Omphalos

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ABSTRACT
The oracular sanctuary of Delphi, in Central Greece, attracted thousands of worshippers from the entire Greek world throughout Antiquity: private pilgrims, sacred embassies, athletes, merchants... According to a well-known myth, Delphi was believed to represent the centre of the world, where two eagles sent by Zeus from the opposite ends of the universe would meet. Strabo has rationalised this legend by reckoning the sanctuary was sitting in the middle of the Greek world, being thus easily reachable from any part of Hellas. This point of view is commonly accepted in modern historiography and the prestige of the oracle has sometimes been linked with its situation at a crossroad between long-reaching regional axes. But this apparent determinism must be challenged by investigating the materiality of the road-network around Delphi. Is the site of the oracle a nodal point in supra-regional itineraries? Was it served by significant roads? Was Delphi an important sanctuary because of this alleged road-network, or should we also consider the hypothesis that roads and circulations centred around Delphi due to its religious significance? This paper aims to reconsider the dynamics of circulations to and from ancient Delphi, by acknowledging the major contribution of recent works about ancient Greek roads.

KEY-WORDS
Ancient Greece; ancient roads; Delphi; Parnassos; Phokis; procession; sacred road

DOI
https://doi.org/10.14712/23368144.2025.1.5

INTRODUCTION

The city of Delphi is located in Central Greece. Hanging on the steep slopes of Mt Parnassos, around 700 meters above sea level, the city and its sanctuary dominate the Pleistos Valley and the Plain of Amphissa, by the Gulf of Corinth (**Fig. 1**).

The shrine of Apollo Pythios was one of the most popular and prestigious cult places in Greece throughout Antiquity. Reputed as the 'navel of the Earth', it was characterised by a frequentation far beyond local or regional scale, despite its – apparently – unwelcoming, mountainous setting. Official ambassadors, foreign kings or private persons would come from every part of the Greek world to consult the oracle. Delphi was also a panhellenic sanctuary, where festivals and competitions attracted worshippers and athletes from every Greek city-state. Inside the *temenos* of the sanctuary, monumental offerings, statues, inscriptions, etc. testify to the social competition raging between the Greek cities, each trying to make the most glorious contribution to the splendour of the god. From the 8th Century BC, precious, exotic offerings indicate that the sanctuary developed a wide-reaching network and had close links with dynamic city-states of mainland Greece, such as Corinth and Athens, but also with Central and Eastern Mediterranean (Morgan 1990; Aurigny 2011). The flux of the worshippers,

athletes and sacred embassies converging in Delphi is essential to the apprehension of its specific dynamics. The complexity of Delphic geography lies in the multiplicity of scales at stakes in those circulations: the local dynamics of the city and its territory; the regional level, especially the cities and *ethne* constituting the Amphictiony, the international association managing the sanctuary (Lefèvre 1998; Sanchez 2001); lastly, the panhellenic level.

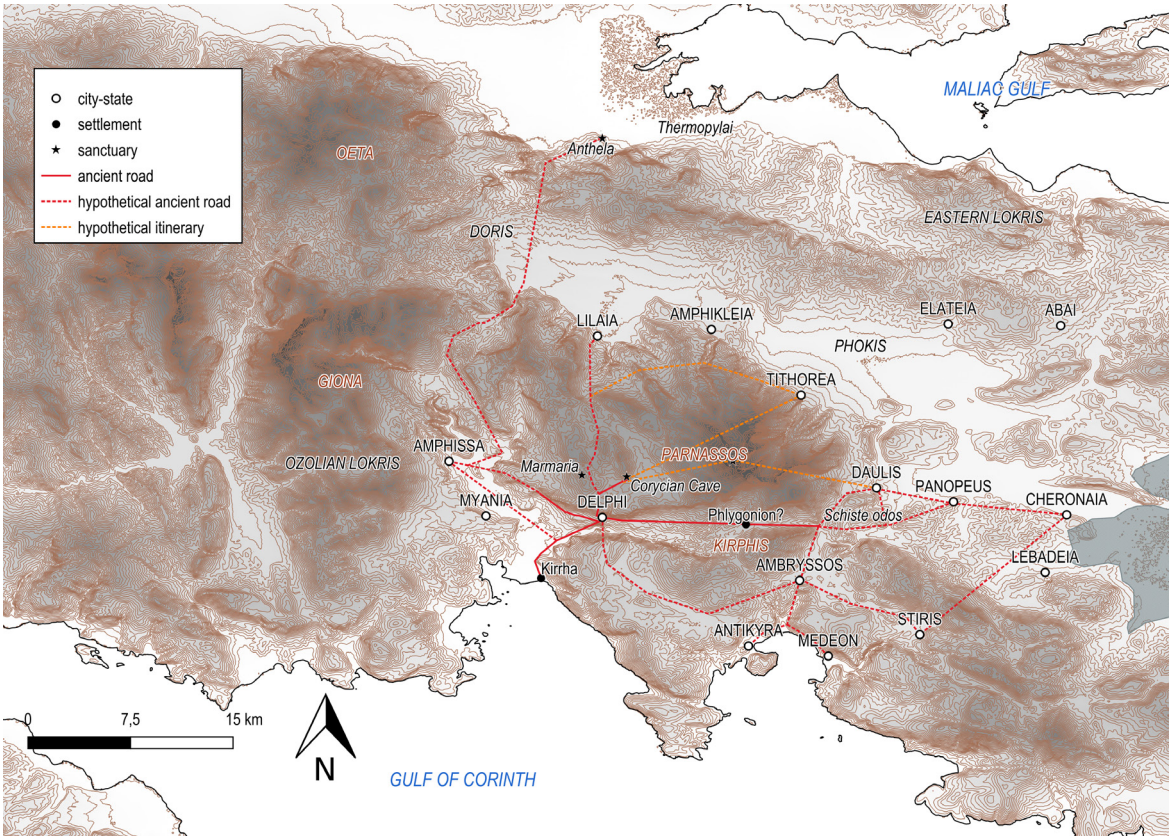

Fig. 1: Road-network around Delphi. Map by Adèle Vorsanger.

In the last decades, the development of the archaeology of ancient roads in Greece has opened the way to new approaches of space and territories in Antiquity (Tausend 2006; Pikoulas 2012; Roelens-Flouneau 2019). Studying the road-network of ancient Delphi sheds a specific light on the complex circulations induced by the sanctuary and their articulation with the local and regional dynamics of a medium-sized city-state. Is it possible to identify 'natural' circulation axes favouring the panhellenic frequentation of Delphi? In what extent did the road-network around Delphi reflect the panhellenic nature of the sanctuary? Was the mythical reputation of the sanctuary as 'navel of the world' based on the realities of the road- and circulation network? Such are the questions that this article intends to answer by studying the ancient road-network of Delphi and the specific role of processional roads to and from the sanctuary and the associated myths.

THE MYTH OF THE *OMPHALOS* AND THE ALLEGED CENTRALITY OF DELPHI

The outstanding place of Delphi in the religious geography of Antiquity appears through a well-known myth. Several sources (Pindar *Pythian Odes* 4.74; Strabo IX, 3.6; Pausanias X, 16.3; Jacquemin 1999, 7–8) relate a myth presenting Delphi as the ὀμφαλὸς γῆς, the 'navel of the Earth' and the centre of the inhabited world. Indeed, it was in Delphi that two birds would meet (eagles, crows, or swans, according to various versions), having left respectively from the East and West ends of the world. This myth was materialised by a stone *omphalos* located inside the temple. Strabo proposes a rationalisation of the myth:

> Now although the greatest share of honour was paid to this temple because of its oracle, since of all oracles in the world it had the repute of being the most truthful, yet the position of the place added something. For it is almost in the centre of Greece taken as a whole, between the country inside the Isthmus and that outside it; and it was also believed to be 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 likelinesses of the birds of the myth. Such being the advantages of the site of Delphi, the people easily came together there, and especially those who lived near it.

In the Geographer's interpretation, the mythical conception of Delphi as 'navel of the Earth' relies on its naturally favourable situation, 'in the centre of Greece taken as a whole', which would have made the sanctuary easy to reach from every part of the Hellenic world. The myth would then translate a geographical fact: Delphi being a central point for the whole Greece, and the natural advantages of this location.

The central character of Delphi and the role that its geographical situation would play in the development of the sanctuary are accepted by several scholars, but this theory is often presented as a given and not thoroughly justified. J. McInerney wrote about Delphi: 'No other location could be as easily reached overland from central Greece while yet remaining accessible from the Corinthian Gulf' (McInerney 1999, 63). Wagner-Hasel considers that two axes (north-south and east-west) cross at Delphi (Wagner-Hasel 2002, 162). J.-M. Luce expresses the same idea, in lyrical terms: 'Delphes entre la montagne et la mer, Delphes entre le Nord et le Sud : le sanctuaire d'Apollon se situe vraiment, comme le veut la légende, au centre du monde' (Luce 2008, 399, 435).

Indeed, the site of Delphi lies approximately in the middle of the north shore of the Corinthian Gulf. It benefits both from terrestrial access towards the rest of Central and Northern Greece, and from a maritime opening on the Gulf through the harbour of Kirrha. In this extent, it is possible to consider that long-reaching itineraries cross in the area of Delphi (Wagner-Hasel 2002, 160–161; Bommelaer 2015, 19): a North-South axis going through Thessaly and Phokis, then via the Gulf of Corinth towards Peloponnese, and an East-West axis through Attica, Boeotia, and Acarnania. But the conception of such long-reaching axes, from Acarnania to Euboea, from Thessaly to the Peloponnese, seems too abstract to serve a concrete analysis of the geographical dynamics at play in the development of the sanctuary. We must then study the ancient roads corresponding to those theoretical axes and assess their actual significance at the scale of continental Greece and in relation with Delphi in Antiquity, challenging the notion of natural, geographical determination to human dynamics and activities. This will allow to put under scrutiny the relation of cause and effect between this alleged centrality and the destiny of the sanctuary.

MAIN ROADS AROUND DELPHI

The road networks of Central Greece, especially Delphi's, have not been thoroughly investigated and published. General considerations about circulation axes and 'natural routes' can be found by J. M. Fossey, F. Dasios, C. Typaldou-Fakiris, and J. McInerney (Fossey 1986, 115–117; Dasios 1992; 1993; McInerney 1999, 40–85; McInerney 2011; Typaldou-Fakiris 2004, 308–316). So far, the road network of ancient Delphi and its surroundings can be reconstituted through the testimony of Pausanias, some archaeologically documented road segments, and historical-geographical plausibility.

TOWARDS EAST

One can access Delphi from the East through Zemeno Pass, near the Boeotian border, and along the Pleistos Valley. Below the Zemeno Pass lies an important regional crossroad, that was called in Antiquity Σχιστὴ ὁδός, the Cleft Road. This is the meeting point of roads going from Delphi to Boeotia, and from the upper Kephisos Valley towards Peloponnesus. It is also the very crossroad where Oedipus is supposed to have killed his father Laios (Pausanias x, 5.3–4, 35.8). This point represents a regional crossroad 18 km away from Delphi (McInerney 1997).

After the Σχιστὴ ὁδός, the road ascents the Zemeno Pass. Pausanias describes it as λεωφόρος (Pausanias x, 5.5), a term referring to an important road. Pikoulas led research in this area in order to identify the ancient road, but could not find clear remains (Pikoulas 1998). The road then follows the North side of the Pleistos valley. Near the town of Delphi, some testimonies of the ancient road can be found. About 1 km away from the archaeological site, a square tower stands at a place called Agios Athanasios, just below the modern road. From the tower towards west, a road terrace can be followed for about ten to twenty meters (Valavanis 1980, 336; Trouki 2022, 77–78). At the entrance of the town, a gate stands at the end of a late-antiquity fortification wall, proving the continuous use of the modern road layout (Amandry 1981b, 742–746; Kyriakidis – Zugmeyer 2019, 258–265). The sanctuary of Athena Pronaia marked the entrance in the city (Sideris 2024; Huber *et al.* 2024).

TOWARDS SOUTH AND WEST

Towards South, Delphi is 11 km away from the sea and the harbour of Kirrha. The harbour lies in a plain that was partially consecrated to the god Apollo. The cultivation of the plain was prohibited, but sacred herds could graze it. Despite this sacred character, roads would obviously cross it: the road between Delphi and Kirrha, as well as roads towards West. The road linking the city and its harbour could not be precisely located, even though numerous visitors would use it after arriving by sea. During the 19th century, remains of ancient road were visible underneath Chrysso (Ulrichs 1840, 24–26; Skorda 1992, 50–53, 58; Rousset 2002a, 54–55; Trouki 2022, 77–78). According to D. Skorda, the *kalderim* between Delphi and Chrysso could follow the ancient route, but D. Rousset doubts it. Delphi does have easy access to the sea, but one can hardly say that the site is a landmark for seafarers on the Corinthian Gulf: from the Delphi, the sea is hidden by the bending of the Pleistos valley (Luce 2011).

A decree of 178 BC incidentally mentions no less than three roads crossing the plain of Kirrha. Two of them, associated with toponyms that cannot be located, were probably of local interest, but the third, a ξενὶς ὁδός, or 'foreign road', was probably leading further, maybe towards Lokris (Rousset 2002a, n°29, l. 19–25).

West of the city of Delphi, above the stadium, the slope of the Parnassos is cut by an escarpment called Koublas, oriented towards South and about 700 m high. Ancient fortifications stood there, maybe erected by the general Philomelos in the 4th century BC (Kyriakidis *et al.* 2015; Kyriakidis – Zugmeyer 2019). In the last centuries, at least four itineraries crossed or turned this crest, one of them opening exactly beneath the rocky slopes of the Parnassos massive (Ulrichs 1840), meeting there two paths, ancient and modern, ascending to the plateau (Amandry 1981a, 35; Trouki 2022, 78).

Towards west, Danish archaeologists reconstituted a well-constructed road leading from the quarries of Profitis Ilias to the sanctuary (Hansen *et al.* 2017). After the quarries, it probably continued until the neighbouring city of Amphissa (Hansen *et al.* 2017, 218–219).

TOWARDS NORTH

Towards north, Delphi can be linked with the upper Kephisos Valley and the Phocidian cities by two main routes: crossing Mt Parnassos just above Delphi, or taking the corridor separating the mountain massifs of Parnassos and Oeta, also called Gravia Corridor. The corridor was surveyed at the end of the 1980s. According to the surveyors, it constituted a major route between the Malian and Corinthian Gulfs, across what they identified as the 'great Isthmus' (Kase *et al.* 1991; Pascual – Papakonstantinou 2013, 321–328). Ancient road remains were located, but cannot be dated precisely, as is often the case for roads used continuously (Kase *et al.* 1991, 21–22, 32; Osborne 1992; Salmon 1993; Alcock 1994; McInerney 1999, 333). Indeed, this corridor represented an axis of great significance for the communications between Northern and Central Greece from Antiquity through the Medieval and Ottoman times (Frantz-Murphy 1991). Ancient roads followed the west flank of the Parnassos, from the plain of Kirrha, rather similarly to the modern road winding between the slopes of Parnassos and Giona, bordering on Lokris, Doris, and Phokis. This route leads to the upper Kephisos valley (Rousset 1989, 203–206). But even though this communication axis had its importance in the circulations to and from Delphi, it should be noted that Delphi is not located directly on the corridor. The city of Amphissa lies at the meeting point between the corridor and the plain. Delphi and its neighbour were not always in good terms, fighting over borderlands.

This must bring attention to the roads crossing Mt Parnassos. This massif culminates at 2500 m above sea level, but several paths and mountain roads were in use in Antiquity. Part of the massif is a wide plateau that was used for grazing, and even cultivated in some places, in particular the *polje* of Livadi. Several cult places were also found in the mountain. Access to the Parnassos massif from Delphian territory is limited by the precipitous terrain. Nowadays, only two routes allow ascent from the Pleistos valley to the massif. From the stadium and the fortifications, an ancient staircase cut into the bedrock climbs up to the plateau, reaching it at a place named Kroki. This ancient path was replaced by a *kalderim* beginning at the fortifications as well and winding up to Kroki (Pausanias x, 32.2; Amandry 1981a, 35; Trouki 2022, 78). Today, a road leads up from Arachova to Livadi, but we cannot affirm whether this route was in use in Antiquity.

Pausanias attests that several important routes between Delphi and the cities around Parnassos crossed the mountain. Two roads linked Delphi to Tithorea, one mountainous, the other carriageable, avoiding the most arduous passages (Pausanias x, 32.8):

> Τιθορέα δὲ ἀπωτέρω Δελφῶν ὀγδοήκοντα ὡς εἰκάσαι σταδίοις ἐστὶ καὶ ἑκατὸν ἰόντι τὴν διὰ τοῦ Παρνασσοῦ· τὴν δὲ οὐ πάντα ὀρεινήν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὀχήμασιν ἐπιτήδειον πλεόνων ἔτι ἐλέγετο εἶναι σταδίων.
>
> Tithorea is, I should guess, about one hundred and eighty stades distant from Delphi on the road across Parnassos. This road is not mountainous throughout, being fit even for vehicles, but was said to be several stades longer.

The first road, ἡ διὰ τοῦ Παρνασσοῦ ('the one through Parnassos') probably took a fairly direct route, crossing the highlands of the eastern part of the massif. The second road, on the other hand, would have bypassed the summits from the west and north. Pausanias says it was carriageable: we must then draw the conclusion that carts were able to travel in the Parnassos massif, but we cannot assess which way they climbed. On the map **Fig. 1**, I represented those itineraries in lighter dotted lines marking their approximate route, since no corresponding remains are known.

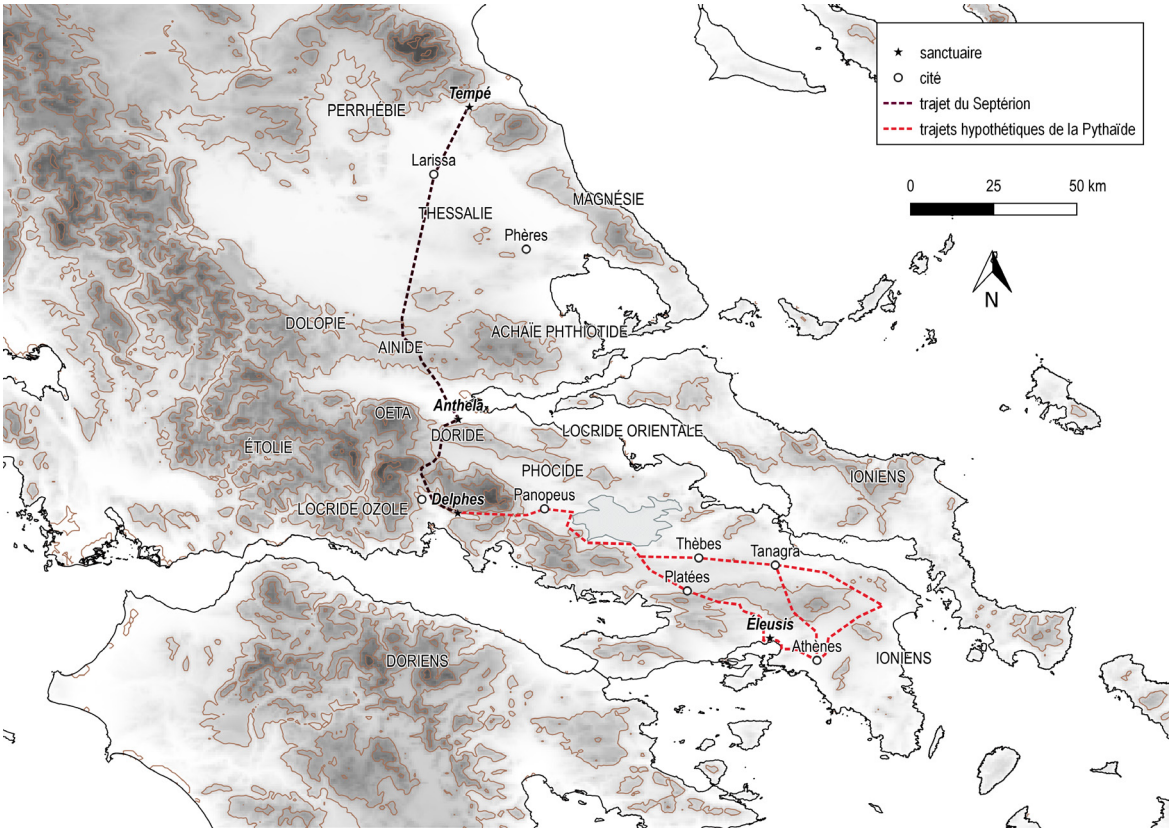

Fig. 2: Routes of the Pythais and the Septerion. Map by Adèle Vorsanger.

There was also a road leading from Delphi to Lilaia. According to Pausanias, it represented a day's walk or 180 stadia (Pausanias x, 33.3). McInerney identified this itinerary with the modern road through the Livadi polje (McInerney 1999, 338). From Delphi, however, this represents a detour to the east that does not seem worthwhile, as Lilaia lies due north. I think we can assume the existence of a much more direct path in Antiquity. Today, a hiking trail crosses the massif from Delphi to Agoriani and Lilaia in a more or less straight line: we can figure that, at least in some extent, the ancient road used a similar itinerary. It climbs the path

from Koublas. At Kroki, the path to Lilaia splits from the path to the Corycian cave, which forks off to the right, and continues North until it reaches ancient Lilaia. It is likely that other ancient roads followed the modern route via Livadi.

Far from being an obstacle to communications, Parnassos may have represented a regional crossroad for Phocidian cities. Crossing the massif represented the most direct link between Delphi and the cities of the Kephisos Valley. Ancient maps show numerous paths through the mountain and along its slopes until the middle of the 20th century. While these roads do not necessarily date back to Antiquity, there is no reason to believe that the density of traffic in the Parnassos was less important then.

IS DELPHI A NATURAL CROSSROAD?

Considering those data on the ancient road network of Delphi, in what extent does the sanctuary appear as a crossroad on long-distance roads? Delphi is accessible without major difficulty from all directions, but the conception that it represents a natural crossroad seems overstated: it is easy to reach, it also lies relatively close to regional nodal points such as the Zemeno pass or the Gravia Corridor, but there is no necessity for a traveller to go through Delphi while on a longer journey from East to West or from North to South. The same remark applies to the maritime accessibility of the sanctuary: it is obviously easy to reach Delphi for people disembarking in Kirrha, but the location of this harbour has nothing remarkable in itself in comparison with other locations on the Gulf of Corinth (Luce 2011, 63).

Delphi even appears relatively off-centre in relation to several of the axes we described. The plain of Kirrha itself occupies a clearer crossroad, as the *Guide de Delphes* rightly points out (Bommelaer 2015, 19). The existence of such axes cannot explain by itself Delphi's brilliant destiny. The precise location of Delphi does not seem particularly significant in regional circulations, and definitely not more significant than other cities of the region, such as Amphissa or Ambryssos for example. At the scale of continental Greece, a lot of other sites and sanctuaries benefitted from a location that wasn't more difficult to reach than Delphi.

Then how come Delphi, among all Greek sanctuaries, got the reputation of 'navel of the earth'? We could affirm with P. Amandry (1992, 204): 'c'est seulement quand le sanctuaire de Delphes a pris son essor qu'on a inventé le mythe des aigles, pour justifier et confirmer par la géographie la place qu'occupait Delphes comme centre religieux et moral'.

We shouldn't consider that Delphi has become a great sanctuary due to its geographic location; in reverse, we could consider that a dense circulation network was constituted around Delphi as the sanctuary grew and acquired panhellenic reputation, or in a more nuanced way envision a combined influence of geography, circulation and spatial organisation on the development and the frequentation of the sanctuary. Moreover, the representation of Delphi as a central point was also partly constructed and entertained in the domain of myth and ritual in order to serve the reputation of the sanctuary.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF CENTRALITY – ROAD CONSTRUCTION AND MAINTENANCE

Some archaeological and epigraphical evidence show investments in the construction and maintenance of roads in connection with the activities of the sanctuary. Unfortunately, such testimonies are rare. Nevertheless, two attestations from the 4th century BC indicate the role played by road maintenance in the life of the sanctuary.

PYTHIA INSCRIPTION

An inscription of the 4th century mentions that the the Amphictiony must see that the cities around Delphi make reparations on the bridges (*CID* IV, 1, l. 40–43).

> ὁδῶν· ΤΑΝ̣[----------τ]|ὰς γεφύρας ἐφακῆσθαι Ἀμφικτίονας κὰτ τὰν αὐτô ἕκαστον Κ[----------] | μὴ σίνηται καὶ τοῦ δρόμ[ου] τοὺς ἱαρομνάμονας τοὺς Ἀμφικτι[ονικοὺς ἐπιμελεῖσθαι ὅτινός κα δ]|έηται καὶ ζαμιούντων τοὶ ἱαρομνάμονες κὴπὶ τοῖς ποταμοῖς […]
>
> Roads. […] The Amphictions will have the bridges repaired, each on his territory […] [they?] shall not be damaged (there shall not be theft?) and for the hippodrome (the stadium?) the amphictionic hieromnemons shall [take the measures?] necessary; and the hieromnemons will fine the [offenders]. And on the rivers […]

The goal of this measure was probably to ensure the circulation before the festival held in Delphi every four years, the Pythia, and maybe also the circulations towards the sanctuary of the Pylai, of which the Amphictiony was responsible as well. The title of this section of the inscription (ὁδῶν, 'about roads') indicates that other measures concerning roads may be lost. Even though each city or ἔθνος member of the Amphictiony is responsible for their own territory, the Amphictiony has a role of initiative and control.

ROADS AND CONSTRUCTION WORK

Other clear examples of intervention upon the road network in connection with the management of the sanctuary are found in the context of the construction work of the temple in the 4th century BC.

We mentioned earlier the good road leading from the quarries of Profitis Ilias to the sanctuary (Hansen *et al.* 2017). According to the analysis of the authors, this road was carefully built in the 4th century, in the context of the temple's reconstruction, in order to enable the transport of stones from the quarry. However, it may have been built over an already existing path, and its purpose was probably wider than the sole service of the quarry (Hansen *et al.* 2017, 218). After Profitis Ilias, this itinerary could extend towards West. Such a road, passing through Profitis Ilias, appears on a 19th century map (Hansen *et al.* 2017, 219). The first objective of the construction of the ancient road was to provide local limestone for the construction work, but this road was part as well of an important axis of the Delphian territory, leading toward Amphissa and the Gravia Corridor.

Still in the context of construction work, an account of 344 BC (*CID* II, 31, l. 83–87) attributes three talents to workers from Tegea ποτὶ τὰν κατασκευὰν τᾶς λιθαγωγίας τᾶς εἰς Δελφούς ('for the construction of a (structure of) stone transport towards Delphi'). The term λιθαγωγία is also found in the construction accounts of the Parthenon and Eleusis, with the meaning of 'transport of stone blocks' (e.g. IG I^3, 436, l. 23; IG I^3, 444, l. 271; I. *Eleusis* 159, l. 12). But here, the word κατασκευάν and the considerable importance of the sum lead to understand the λιθαγωγία as an infrastructure. It can thus be interpreted as a causeway specially laid out for the transport of stone blocks from the harbour of Kirrha to the sanctuary. Indeed, at the date of the text, the limestone from Profitis Ilias were no longer used in the construction work (Bousquet 1989, 56; Amandry – Hansen 2010, 476). The λιθαγωγία could be a carefully built road, similar to the one known from the quarries of Profitis Ilias to Delphi. Similarly to this

latter road, even though during the construction the λιθαγωγία would be primarily used for the conveying of construction materials, the investment could allow the layout of a well-built road between the harbour and the sanctuary.

This documentation is scarce, as is often the case, if not always, about ancient Greek roads. But, with all necessary precautions, it does testify a certain level of investment of the Amphictiony and the city in the road-network serving the sanctuary.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF CENTRALITY – MYTH AND RITUAL

On another level, the central character of the sanctuary is conveyed through myth and ritual. Quoting A. Jacquemin, Delphi represents 'un centre plus cultuel que vraiment géographique' (Jacquemin 1999, 9). Nonetheless, the elaboration of the Delphic representation as navel of the world unveils the sanctuary's peculiar relation to the Greek space, which can be analysed through foundation myths and processions.

A WALKING APOLLO. THE FOUNDATION MYTH OF THE SANCTUARY

Despite the existence of several versions (Luce 2008, 427), the Delphic foundation myth can be resumed as follows: after his birth in Delos, Apollo leaves on a journey to found his oracle. Having chosen Delphi, he kills the monstrous Python to take possession of the site. Following this murder, he has to leave Delphi temporarily in order to undergo purification rituals. Details of the routes taken by the god vary between the different versions. The *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, composed at the beginning of the 6th century BC (Kyriakidis 2011, 41), includes the account of the god's journey in search of a suitable location for his oracle (v.182–546). Leaving the Olympus, Apollo first travels through amphictionic lands: the land of the Ainianes and Perrhebia. Refusing to settle in Euboea, he crosses the plain of Thebes, which the text describes as uninhabited and overgrown with woods (*Homeric Hymn to Apollo* v. 225–228). The image of Apollo clearing a path through the primal forest also appears in an Athenian version of the myth, through Aeschylus and scholia to his text (Aeschylus, *Eumenides* v. 7–16; see also Detienne 1997, 33).

Symmetrically to his path towards Delphi, Apollo also realises a journey towards North, and more specifically the valley of Tempe, in order to purify himself from the murder of the monstrous *drakaina* who was guarding the fountain Castalia in Delphi (*Homeric Hymn to Apollo* v. 300–310; Plutarch, *Greek Questions* 12 [293c]; *The Obsolescence of Oracles* 15 [418a–b]). He brings back laurel from Tempe, with which he makes himself a crown according to Aelian, and, according to certain traditions, builds the first temple at Delphi (Aelian, *Historical Miscellany* 3.1; Pausanias x, 5.9; Luce 2008, 431).

The foundation myths of the sanctuary thus present the figure of a walking god. The travels of Apollo play a role of domestication and organisation of the territory, giving the foundation of the oracle by Apollo the aspect of a civilizing journey. Two itineraries stand out. Apollo arrives in Delphi from the East, either from Boeotia or Attica depending on the versions. Then he accomplishes another journey, from Delphi to the valley of Tempe. These two itineraries follow routes that were commemorated by the Greeks in the form of processions (**Fig. 2**).

DELPHI AND THE PYTHAIS PROCESSION

The Athenian version of the Delphic foundation myth constitutes the *aition* of a procession called the Pythais, leading from Athens to Delphi. According to Strabo, this procession was supposed to take the same route as the god Apollo when he first came to create his oracle (Strabo IX, 3.12; Kühn 2018, 86–88).

The group of the Pythaists left Athens at irregular dates and walked the ca 160 km to the sanctuary. The route followed by the procession is not known with certainty, but the Pythais undoubtedly followed one of the main routes between Athens and central Greece. To determine the route of the procession more precisely, we can base our reasoning on the known roads in Attica, Boeotia, and Phokis, but the details of the itinerary have been disputed and cannot be precisely reconstructed (Boëthius 1918; Daverio Rocchi 2002; Pirisino 2015; Kühn 2018). Despite the philological, geographical, and archaeological arguments that can be put forward, the reconstruction of the route can be resumed to two or three competing hypotheses, which correspond to the major axes linking Attica to Boeotia and Phocis.

In my opinion, the most plausible steps are as follows: a road marker of the 'sacred road of the Pythais' discovered in Athens (Lalonde – Langdon 1991: Horoi H34; Shear 1939, 212; Parsons 1943, 237; SEG 22.147; Kühn 2018, 128) supports the idea that the procession took the road to Eleusis, also known as 'sacred road' for the Athenians. From there, the best route to Boeotia is via Oinoe and Eleutherai (Fachard 2013). The Boeotian part of the route is difficult to determine. Going through Thebes represents a slightly longer route, but this is not prohibitive. As the procession undoubtedly passed through Panopeus, according to the testimony of Strabo (Strabo IX, 3.12; Colin 1905, 170; Kühn 2018, 205), it necessarily skirted the southern shore of Lake Copais as far as Chaeronea before entering Phokis, which corresponds to the route described by Pausanias as the major axis of the region (Pausanias X, 35.8; Daverio Rocchi 2002, 151–152). The procession then headed for the crossroad of the Σχιστὴ ὁδός and entered the Pleistos valley, which it followed to Delphi. This irregular procession may also have taken different routes over the centuries.

The Pythais and the related myths enabled the Athenians to assert the existence of a privileged link between their city and the sanctuary of Delphi (Karila-Cohen 2005). The tradition of Apollo's stay at Athens and the intervention of the κελευθοποιοί, recalled in the Pythais' journey, enabled the Athenians to ascribe themselves a major role in the god's civilizing action and the foundation of the sanctuary. Aelius Aristides' *Panathenaicus* goes so far as to assert that the Athenians built the road between their city and Delphi (Aelius Aristides, *Panathenaicus* 363–364): for G. Daverio Rocchi, Athens thus maintained its image as the guarantor of an order that went beyond its own borders (Daverio Rocchi 2002, 157). Lastly, it should be emphasized that all the myths and rituals associated with the Pythais are purely Athenian, and are in no way part of traditions originating in Delphi. This special link between Athens and Delphi seems to have been built by the Athenians.

THE SEPTERION PROCESSION

Towards north, another road is invested with a myth and rituals: the road between Delphi and the valley of Tempe, north of the Thessalian plain. This route was used in a processional context during the festival of the Septerion. Every eighth year, this ritual commemorated Apollo's purification journey after the murder of Pytho (Plutarch, *Greek Questions* 12 [293c]; *The Obsolescence of Oracles* 15 [418a]; Aelian, *Historical Miscellany* 3.1). Plutarch refers to the Septerion route as a sacred road and Aelian associates it with the myth. Aelian's text affirms that the procession

crossed several regions, listed from North to South, whose inhabitants welcomed the Delphians with great respect: Thessaly, Pelasgy, Oeta, the land of the Ainians, Melis, Doris, Western Lokris. The populations listed here were all members of Amphictiony, and commentators on the text have pointed out that the procession's route was clearly intended to connect Delphi with these peoples (Mottas – Decourt 1997, 336; Wagner-Hasel 2002, 173–177). Therefore, the procession probably took the road leaving Delphi via the North-West and the corridor linking Amphissa and Gravia, skirting Lokris and Doris before reaching Malis, in accordance with Aelian's enumeration. For B. Wagner-Hasel, this demonstration of goodwill between the Delphians and the peoples of the regions they crossed is linked, more broadly, to the Amphictions' concern for the communications network and the safety of travels around Amphictionic sanctuaries (Wagner-Hasel 2002, 173–177). Moreover, the journey of Apollo preceding the foundation of the sanctuary of Delphi can also be recognised in the background of the Septerion procession: the *Homeric hymn to Apollo* shows the god crossing part of Thessaly, Perrhebia and the land of the Ainians (*Homeric Hymn to Apollo* v. 216–218; Wagner-Hasel 2002, 176). We see here the coalescence of several myths and rituals, linked to Delphi and other communities in central Greece, while the route concerned remains remarkably unambiguous.

The sacred road leading from Delphi to Tempe seems to have been closely linked to the amphictionic organisation. It may have acquired the status of sacred road when the Amphictiony of the Pylai, centred around the sanctuary of Anthela, also took control of Delphi (Lefèvre 1998, 13–14; Sanchez 2001, 34–35; Londey 2024).

In any case, it is clear that various myths and rituals impregnate several roads around Delphi. Delphi is represented as the 'navel of the world'. Apollo's wanderings play a major role in the myth of foundation of Delphi: centripetal when he comes to found his magnificent temple, centrifugal to atone for the murder of the beast, reactivated by processions, but also by the travels of the hieromnemons and theoroi. Roads played a central part in the development of a mythological and ritual corpus sustaining Delphic influence throughout continental Greece. In a reverse movement, Athens appropriated elements of this discourse to claim a privileged relationship with the sanctuary through the Pythais procession. But there is no reason to believe that Athens was the only community to do so. The rites linked to Tempe and the sacred way attested by Herodotus in central Greece (Herodotus vi, 34) may have been the result of similar strategies on the part of the Thessalians and Boeotians. Competition between cities within the sanctuary, through offerings, was also reflected in the sacred character of roads and ritual circulations linked to Delphi.

CONCLUSION. CONSTRUCTING A CENTRE OF CIRCULATIONS

The sanctuary of Delphi represents the centre of complex networks of circulations. Its panhellenic character and the attraction of the oracle caused constant circulations between Delphi and the rest of the Greek cities. Those circulations left their mark in the Delphian landscape: either through archaeology or written sources, we know about roads constructed and maintained in relation to the activities of the sanctuary. But the centrality attributed to Delphi, the so-called navel of the world, has no natural character. The axes crossing the territory Delphi and its surroundings gained importance with the growth of the sanctuary, and the central character of the site was progressively constructed by several factors: the circulations themselves and the flow of travellers and pilgrims going to the sanctuary; the construction and maintenance of roads; mythological and ritual discourses inscribing Delphi in a legendary and religious geography, in which roads play an important part. This representation of Del-

phi as a central place gives a geographical and mythological justification to the status of the sanctuary: a spatial construction that contributed to its prestige.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CID II = J. Bousquet 1989: *Les comptes du quatrième et du troisième siècle*. Corpus des inscriptions de Delphes II. Paris.
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SEG = Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum

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