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Where Did the Gods Speak? A Proposal for (Re)defining "Oracular Sanctuaries" on the Basis of Anatolian Data of the Hellenistic and Roman Period

When reading ancient Greek and Latin authors like Cicero, Strabo, Plutarch or Pausanias, one can easily observe how numerous the sanctuaries performing divinatory rituals were, being called as a consequence "oracles": μαντεῖον or χρηστήριον in Greek, *oraculum* in Latin. However, modern historical studies focused on a few oracular sanctuaries, most of them being apollonian. Delphi, of course, was regarded by ancient literature, from Herodotus to Augustine, as the archetypical oracle, and was often called "the oracle", ancient readers knowing which sanctuary it meant.[1] This ancient and literary shortcut gave birth to the modern and historical idea of a certain homogeneity – or even unity – of the oracular phenomenon: oracles were mostly apollonian, essentially of Pythian type, thus based on the inspiration of a rather feminine medium, answering the questions asked after some preparatory rituals.

However, ancient literature also shows many other oracular shrines, with much less fame and reputation, not dedicated to Apollo, using other divinatory methods, and having very different profiles.[2] Studying these sanctuaries allows to reconsider the oracular phenomenon in its variety, complexity and importance and to show oracular sanctuaries were not only large and prestigious but seldom apollonian sanctuaries copying the Delphic model.[3] Doing so implies (1) studying these less famous and "smaller" (when compared to "bigger" ones such as Delphi, Dodona, Claros or Didyma) but numerous oracular sanctuaries, (2) comparing them with one another and with the "bigger" and well-documented sanctuaries, starting with Delphi. The first step requires the preliminary identification, description and mapping of these sanctuaries, as precisely as the documentation allows it. Such a work can hardly be done for the whole Greek world, especially within the frame of an article. Consequently, this reflection will rely only on the Anatolian case.[4] Anatolia was vast, rich and populated enough to shelter hundreds of sanctuaries and provide us with significant literary,

1 Some major publications on Delphi: Amandry 1950; Delcourt 1955; Parke/Wormell 1956; Fontenrose 1959; Defradas 1972; Roux 1976; Fontenrose 1978; Bowden 2005; Kindt 2016.

2 As illustrated by Bouché-Leclerq 1879–1882.

3 Even though Claros and Didyma seemed to have willingfully adopted some Delphic characteristics such as divinatory methods, symbols and/or architectural programs (Bouillot 2019a).

4 And on the conclusions of a doctoral thesis defended in 2019, under the supervision of Nicole Belayche (École Pratique des Hautes Études) and Pierre Bonnechere (University of Montreal): Bouillot 2019b.

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epigraphic and archaeological documentations for the Hellenistic and Roman periods. It was also a culturally and religiously mixed territory, with Greek-founded cities in the West and pre-Greek but later Hellenised cities and peoples in the Centre and East.[5] Such geographical, historical, cultural and religious backgrounds produced numerous and various oracular sanctuaries, some being very close to the Delphic "model" (i. e. Claros and Didyma), others being very different.

This study aims at illustrating the plasticity of the oracular phenomenon, in relation with the *ERC MAP* study of the links between space and the gods, and of the definition and the designation of divine places. The method used for identifying the oracular sanctuaries of Anatolia will first be explained, before describing in broad lines Anatolian oracular sanctuaries and their variety. Then this article will offer a few perspectives regarding the mapping and (re)definition of these places where the gods used to speak.

1 Identifying and Listing Oracles: Preliminary Method

Studying oracles first requires a method of identification of these sanctuaries. To be as exhaustive as possible, such an inventory must take into account all the elements that designated sanctuaries as oracles.[6] Since the available documentation is mostly literary and epigraphic, these markers are lexical ones. Then Hellenistic and Roman Anatolia also displayed some religious specificities that must be considered and dealt with when looking for oracular sanctuaries.

1.1 Lexical Markers: Which Sanctuaries Were Oracles?

Lexical markers designating a sanctuary as oracular are basically all the characteristic terms displayed by already-identified oracles (starting with Delphi, Claros, Didyma of Dodona) in related literary or epigraphic documentations. Some of them directly and obviously designate the oracular shrine, others do it more indirectly and subtly.

The first of these terms is the explicit designation of the sanctuary as an oracle: μαντεῖον and χρηστήριον in Greek, *oraculum* in Latin,[7] since Delphi, Claros, Didyma

5 See Mitchell 1993.

6 Such inventories were made already, but for a specific region (i. e. Bonnechere 1990), or a specific god, or remained incomplete: Parke 1967; Parke 1985; Curnow 2002; Friese 2010.

7 On the etymologies and origins of these terms, Chantraine 1999, *s. v.* μάντις and *s. v.* χρησμ-.

or Dodona were thus designated by ancient authors.[8] For instance, in his *Description of the Bosphorus*, Geographer Dionysius of Byzantium attests this way of an oracular sanctuary (χρηστήριον) of Apollo in Chalcedon of Bithynia, that would not be known otherwise.[9]

Then every sanctuary where oracles were given as answers to questions asked by consultants should also be regarded as oracular. The words designating oracular responses are thus other lexical markers, when associated to a precise sanctuary:[10] μαντεῖον and its feminine variant μαντεία or χρησμοί in Greek, and again *oraculum* in Latin.[11] The *Greek Anthology* evokes an oracle (χρησμός) given by Apollo to Olympias, Alexander the Great's mother, while she was in Cyzicus in Mysia.[12] Though historically doubtful, the anecdote testifies at least the existence of this oracular sanctuary.[13]

The titles worn by the specific staff of oracular sanctuaries can also be regarded as oracular markers.[14] Though Pythias only existed at Delphi,[15] prophets etymologically "speaking for" [the deity] were attested in many of the "big oracles".[16] Delphi, Claros and Didyma had prophets of Apollo.[17] Greek authors even used this term for oracular sanctuaries out of the Greek world, such as the Libyan oracle of Siwah and its "prophets of Amun-Zeus".[18] Other terms and titles should also be taken into account because of their use in oracular sanctuaries, such as *chresmodos* (χρησμῳδός) or *thespiodos* (θεσπιῳδός), etymologically designating someone who "sings oracles", or "sings under inspiration".[19] "Promantis" (πρόμαντις) is also used for what is elsewhere called a prophet(ess).[20] Some oracular sanctuaries also had a mantiarch, a

8 For instance, Delphi is called a μαντεῖον by Herodotus (I, 46; 53), a χρηστήριον by the same author (I, 13; 23; 46; 86; IV, 150; 155; 163; V, 42; 79; VI, 19; 35; 66; 86; 125; VII, 239) and an *oraculum* by Cicero, (*De divinatione*, I, 1; 19; 43; II, 117).

9 Dionysius of Byzantium, *De Bospori navigatione*, 111, 35 (edition by Güngerich 1927). On this oracle, Bouché-Leclercq 1879–1882, 721–722; Parke 1956, 179–180; Robu 2007.

10 Again the example of Delphi and its oracular productions called μαντεῖον by Herodotus (I, 46; 55; IV, 164; V, 80; 89; V, 92; VIII, 51; 142), or μαντεία (VI, 57) and χρησμός (I, 66; III, 58; IV, 164) by the same author, and *oraculum* by Cicero (*De divinatione*, I, 37; II, 57).

11 Ernout/Meillet 2001, *s. v. oro*.

12 *Greek Anthology*, XIII, 114. Paton 1910, XIII, 114.

13 Which epigraphy then allows to confirm: *IMT Kyz Kapu Dağ* 1759; *IMT Kyz PropKueste* 1919 and 1922.

14 On this very complex subject, see Georgoudi 1998.

15 And in relation with the Delphic myths, as explained by the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, 363–369.

16 Chantraine 1999, *s.v.* φημί and *s.v.* πρό. On the history of the term and its uses in oracular context, see Motte 2013.

17 Considering again the example of Delphi, see Herodotus (VIII, 37), Strabo (IX, 3, 5) or Plutarch (*On oracles*, 414b).

18 Plato, *Alcibiades*, II, 49b. On this oracle, Anson 2003.

19 Iamblichus calls "χρησμῳδός" the prophetising woman of Didyma (*On the mysteries*, III, 11), and Diodorus of Sicilly calls θεσπιῳδός the Delphic Pythia (XVI, 26, 6.)

20 Herodotus mentions προμάντεις in Dodona's oracle (VII, 111 and VIII, 135).

"chief of diviners", attesting a hierarchised divinatory activity in the sanctuary.[21] To all of these Greek terms should be added their Latin equivalents used by Roman authors, even though the translation from Greek into Latin was often complex, the Romans speaking of *vates*, *vaticinor*, *divinantis*, *hariola*, *augur*, *interpres*, etc.[22]

More indirect markers can be found in dedicatory inscriptions whose text specified they had been made κατὰ χρησμόν or κατὰ τὴν μαντείαν, "in accordance with an oracle".[23] This mention is probably based on quite constant a scenario: the dedicator first consulted a god in an oracular sanctuary about some project, and the god told them to make an offering to another god or to themself, in order to succeed. A sanctuary displaying several of these inscriptions is very likely to be oracular, with a tutelary deity asking for dedications for themself, as did Apollo of Claros.[24]

Eventually, all terms applied to a sanctuary and carrying an oracular meaning or background can attest of the oracular dimension of the said sanctuary. An epiclesis designating the local god as oracular can, for instance, allow to consider the sanctuary as oracular.

1.2 Dice and Alphabetical Oracles and Confession Stelae: Divinatory Rites but Non-Oracular Sanctuaries

Historians of ancient divination are familiar with three major peculiarities of Hellenistic and Roman Anatolia that look very close to oracular sanctuaries but cannot be considered such.

The first two of them are the "alphabetic and dice oracles".[25] The latter's are 21 inscriptions from southwestern Anatolia, dating from the 2nd-3rd centuries CE. They are lists of 56 oracular responses, each attributed to a god and corresponding to one of the possible results of the throwing of five four-sided dices. The "consultant" addressed a question to the gods, rolled the dices and considered the result as answering their question. The alphabetical oracles, from the same centuries and region, are twelve in number, and operate according to the same principle, but with

21 Such as the apollonian oracle of Pyla in Cyprus, Robert 1978, 338–344 and Vernet 2015.

22 Cicero being the main source of information on the matter: *De divinatione*, I, 2; 11; 32; 41; 58; II, 5; 26; 41; 72 (*vates*); I, 18 (*vaticinor*); I, 56; II, 5; 21 (*divinantis*); I, 49; 50; II, 3; 4, 63; 64 (*divinus*); I, 2 (*hariola*); II, 4; 35 (*haruspex*); I, 3; 4; 15–18; 34–35; 39–41; 43; 47–48; 58; II, 5; 30; 33–39; 53 (*augur*); II, 54 (*interpres*); I, 41 (*magus*); I, 1; 41; II, 33; 41–44; 47; 53; 72 (*Chaldaeus*); I, 34; 43 (*sacerdos*).

23 On these questions and documents, Kajava 2009.

24 Merkelbach/Stauber 1996.

25 For a general study, Nollé 2007, 19–222, but also Graf 2005 and Duval 2016.

24 responses starting with a different Greek letter.[26] These stelae partly assumed an oracular function: they enabled one in search of decision-making aid to consult "the gods". But they were not sanctuaries, nor sacred places. Even though they may depend on a sanctuary, no such link has been established so far.

The third of these Anatolian specificities is a constantly growing list of "confession stelae" or *Beichtinschriften*, also from western and southwestern Anatolia.[27] Their authors told of being afflicted by a misfortune, having discovered it was a punishment from a specific deity, for a fault they had committed. They explained having recognised it, and hoped to be reconciled with the deity thanks to these inscriptions. Historians raised questions about how these dedicators identified the offended god and the nature of the offense. The stelae rarely provide information on this point, but some use terms which may suggest the god had been consulted on these questions.[28] But the sanctuaries where such "confessions" were made did not display any of the oracular markers previously identified, and thus can be attributed none of the oracular activities attested by them. For this reason, these sanctuaries will not be regarded as oracles.

2 Studying and Reconsidering Oracles and Their Variety: Main Characteristics and Examples

The study of the great oracular sanctuaries long suggested that oracles were mostly dedicated to Apollo, rather using what Bouché-Leclercq called "inductive divination" – and the Greeks called enthusiasm – that is a human medium receiving inspiration and responding directly to the questions asked.[29] In addition, oracles seemed to be "big" sanctuaries, frequented by private individuals but above all by cities, kings and emperors, like Delphi, Claros or Didyma. But once Anatolian sanctuaries have been identified, listed and described, they draw a more various profile.

26 Nollé 2007, 223–280.

27 For inventories of such inscriptions, Petzl 1998a; Petzl 1998b; Ricl 1995 and 2003. The name given to these inscriptions is due to Steinleitner 1913. For a critical analysis of such documents: Belayche 2006.

28 On this issue, see Chaniotis 2009.

29 Bouché-Leclercq 1879, 95–278. On this issue and its Delphic example, Flacelière 1938; Amandry 1950; Flacelière 1950; Dietrich 1992; Maurizio 1995; Lehoux 2007.

2.1 Variety and Differences: Three Sanctuaries As Examples (Hadrianoi, Aegae and Sura)

Though reviewing all of these oracular sanctuaries attested in Anatolia is impossible and is not the point of this article, three brief examples among them illustrate the results of this identification method.

In Hadrianoi of Mysia, a small and badly-known city,[30] lexical markers allow the identification of an oracular sanctuary of Zeus Kersoullos ignored by literary documentations.[31] Though the temple has not been localised, eighteen inscribed dedications from the 1st to 3rd centuries CE mentioned the name of the prophet of the local god:[32]

> Ἀγαθῇ Τύχῃ
> Κλέανδρο[ς] [. . . . .]
> Πόλεως Ἀδ[ρι]ανῆς
> Διὶ Κερσούλλ[ῳ] τὸν
> καίονα ἀνέστ[η]σα
> ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων [προφη]
> τεύσα[ντος] Ἀπολλοω-
> νίου Ἐπιθυμήτου
>
> With good fortune, Cleandros [son of ?], from the city of Hadrianoi, erected the pillar for Zeus Kersoullos from his own resources, Apollonios son of Epithymetos being prophet.[33]

As illustrated by this example, the prophet's name is used as a way to date the dedication, without any explicit intervention of the prophet in the dedication process. But other dedications from Hadrianoi were made "according to an order" of the god (κατὰ ἐπιταγὴν Διὸς Κερσούλλου).[34] Such a mention could illustrate the very last stage of an oracular consultation: after having asked how to achieve a project, the consultant was answered (as a "order") they should dedicate to the very god they were consulting. Consequently the epigraphic corpus of Hadrianoi gives us a glimpse into the way private consultants used local oracular sanctuaries.

In Aegae of Aeolid, five inscriptions mention a local Apollo with an explicitly oracular epiclesis (Ἀπόλλων Χρηστήριος):

> [Φιλέταιρος]
> Ἀττάλω
> Ἀπόλλωνι
> Χρηστηρίῳ

30 See Schwertheim, *IK Hadrianoi* and Boatwright 2000, 70–71.
31 On this god and its peculiar epiclesis, see Jones 2012.
32 Mainly *IK Hadrianoi* 6, 12, 19, 23, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 33, 34, 35.
33 Battistoni/Rothenhöfer 2013, 122–123, n°17.
34 For instance *IK Hadrianoi* 8.

τὰν χώραν
ἀνέθηκε
ὡς αἱ στᾶλ-
αι ὁρίσζοισιν.

[Philétairos], son of Attalus, dedicated this land, as limited by the stelae, to Apollo Chresterios.[35]

Among these five inscriptions, three (including the one above) were dedications made by the royal dynasty of Pergamum,[36] illustrating the importance of this sanctuary, at least at local scale. The other two were (1) a similar dedication made by the people of the city (ὁ δᾶμος), and (2) a private dedication mentioning the emperors (τοῖς Σ[ε]βαστοῖ[ς]) and illustrating the continuity of this cult during the imperial times, long after the end of the Attalid dynasty.[37] There is, as a matter of fact, no literary evidence of the oracular sanctuary, and no other documentation on this matter.[38] Without this explicit epiclesis, the oracle of Aegae could not have been identified.

The last example is associated to the Lycian city of Sura, where an apollonian oracle used quite a peculiar method to get answers, illustrating the oracular variety. This time the case is known by literary documentation mostly, starting with a quotation of the historian Polycharmus by Atheneus:

οὐ κατασιωπήσομαι δὲ οὐδὲ τοὺς ἐν Λυκίᾳ ἰχθυομάντεις ἄνδρας, περὶ ὧν ἱστορεῖ Πολύχαρμος ἐν δευτέρῳ Λυκιακῶν γράφων οὕτως· ‘ὅταν γὰρ διέλθωσι πρὸς τὴν θάλασσαν, οὗ τὸ ἄλσος ἐστὶ πρὸς τῷ αἰγιαλῷ τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος, ἐν ᾧ ἐστιν ἡ δῖνα ἐπὶ τῆς ἀμάθου, παραγίνονται ἔχοντες οἱ μαντευόμενοι ὀβελίσκους δύο ξυλίνους, ἔχοντας ἐφ’ ἑκατέρῳ σάρκας ὀπτὰς ἀριθμῷ δέκα. καὶ ὁ μὲν ἱερεὺς κάθηται πρὸς τῷ ἄλσει σιωπῇ, ὁ δὲ μαντευόμενος ἐμβάλλει τοὺς ὀβελίσκους εἰς τὴν δῖναν καὶ ἀποθεωρεῖ τὸ γινόμενον. μετὰ δὲ τὴν ἐμβολὴν τῶν ὀβελίσκων πληροῦται θαλάσσης ἡ δῖνα καὶ παραγίνεται ἰχθύων πλῆθος τοσοῦτον [καὶ τοιοῦτον] ὥστ’ ἐκπλήττεσθαι τὸ ἀόρατον τοῦ πράγματος, τῷ δὲ μεγέθει τοιούτων ὥστε καὶ εὐλαβηθῆναι. ὅταν δὲ ἀπαγγείλῃ τὰ εἴδη τῶν ἰχθύων ὁ προφήτης, οὕτως τὸν χρησμὸν λαμβάνει παρὰ τοῦ ἱερέως ὁ μαντευόμενος περὶ ὧν ἠύξατο. φαίνονται δὲ ὀρφοί, γλαῦκοι, ἐνίοτε δὲ φάλλαιναι ἢ πρίστεις, πολλοὶ δὲ καὶ ἀόρατοι ἰχθῦς καὶ ξένοι τῇ ὄψει.

And I will not pass over in silence, either, the fish-diviners of Lycia, an account of whom is given by Polycharmus in the second book of his History of Lycia. He writes as follows: “Near the shore of the sea is the sacred grove of Apollo, in which there is a pool on the borders of the sand. Whenever they pass through to it, those who would consult the oracle come with two wooden rods, on each of which are pieces of roasted meat, ten in number. The priest seats himself in silence near the grove, while the man in quest of a sign puts the rods into the pool and watches the result. After the rods are put in, the pool is filled with sea-water, and there comes a quantity of fishes, so great and so extraordinary, that one is astounded by the

35 *SEG 36*, 1110.

36 *SEG* 36, 1110, *CIG* 3527, Malay, *Researches* 22,3.

37 *OGIS* 450 and *Alt. von Aegae* 23(1).

38 Even though Aelius Aristides, *Sacred tales*, V, 19–22 mentions “seers” (μάντεις) in a mountain sanctuary located in the area and that could be the one of Aegae.

> unheard-of spectacle, while he is also rendered cautious by the size of such creatures. And when the spokesman reports the kinds of fish, the oracle-seeker gets from the priest the prophecy of those things which concern his prayer. There appear sea-perch, grey-fish, sometimes even whales or pristes, and also fishes never before seen, and strange to the eye."[39]

Such a divinatory method, known as ichthyomancy, has no equivalent in any other Greek oracle. This Lycian peculiarity may have Hittite origins. D. Lefèvre-Novaro and A. Mouton compared this ichtyomancy with rituals attested by Hittite tablets and based on the observation of an aquatic animal trapped in a pool and fed by priests.[40] The said animal, called *MUŠ* in the tablets, could be an eel, thus a fish. Sura's oracle could consequently be an illustration of continuities between pre-Greek and Greek sanctuaries, cults and rites, including oracular ones. This would contribute to explain the association of Apollo, god of divination in general, to a mode of consultation and an animal that do not fit his traditional (and Delphic) attributions, but that may have been inherited from a previous cult and pre-Greek deity.[41]

These three examples show how different these Anatolian oracular sanctuaries could be from one another and from the well-studied and big ones.

2.2 Various Gods, Methods, Staffs and Few Preserved Answers: Comparing Oracles

Using the previously established list of lexical markers allows to identify forty-six Anatolian sanctuaries that can be considered oracular (including the previous three, but out of Claros and Didyma).[42] Though not all of them are precisely described by the available documentation, their comparison allows to study four main characteristics: the oracular deity, the oracular method, the oracular staff and the recording of oracular answers.

Among oracular deities, Apollo clearly prevails, with 19 of the 40 oracular shrines whose tutelary deity is known (Fig. 1). But the list includes many other deities, some of which are quite surprising as counselling deities: Cronos, Ares, or Hades and Persephone. There are also mythological heroes like Amphilochos, son of Amphiaraos who owned another oracular sanctuary at Oropos, in Attica.[43] More historical figures are on the list, such as Peregrinos, a 2nd century CE philosopher.[44] Remarkable is also the absence, in this list, of female oracular deities, at least alone.

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39 Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophistae*, VIII, 8. Translation by W. Heinemann, Loeb, 1930.

40 Lefèvre-Novaro/Mouton 2008, 7–51.

41 On the sanctuary itself, and for further analysis, see Borchhardt 1975.

42 On these lists, see Bouillot 2019.

43 See Sineux 2007b.

44 On the philosopher, his life and the available documentation, see Hornsby/Hazel 1933, Edwards 1989, Jones 1993.

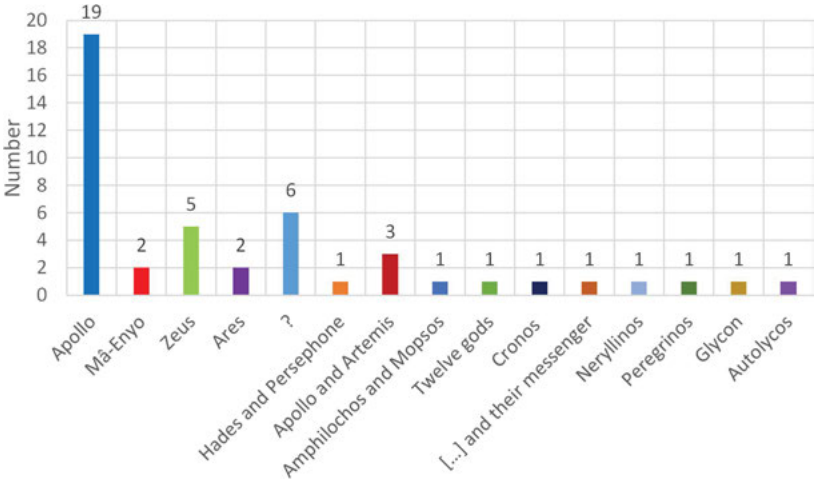

Fig. 1: Deities and heroes of the "small" oracular sanctuaries attested in Anatolia (© Bouillot).

The divinatory method used in these forty-six Anatolian oracular sanctuaries is very rarely specified by the documentation (Fig. 2). But Pythian-type enthusiasm does not prevail, since it is totally absent from the seven small Anatolian sanctuaries whose ritual mode of consultation is known today. Though it is very difficult to conclude from such a small sample, one can state the diversity of methods. Incubation, which was also used in the healing sanctuaries of Asclepius, was quite common in oracular shrines.[45] Other methods used in Anatolian oracular shrines are more surprising, such

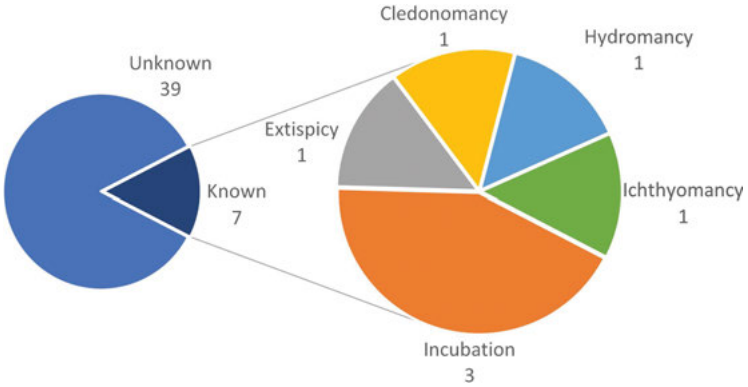

Fig. 2: Divinatory methods of the "small" oracular sanctuaries attested in Anatolia (© Bouillot).

45 On such sanctuaries: Sineux 2004; Riethmüller 2005; Sineux 2007a; Ehrenheim 2015. And on dreams and incubation in general: Renberg 2017, 310–326.

as hydromancy at Cyaneae of Lycia.[46] The methods are therefore diverse, and the gods are clearly not associated to a proper or unique method, as the great oracles of Apollo using enthusiasm suggested.

Another major point of variety among the Anatolian oracles stems from the titles worn by the religious staff in charge of oracular rites. The prophets dominate numerically, but this is no hard and fast rule (Fig. 3). It is also possible that in some of the shrines for which we have no indication, the person(s) in charge of these rites did not bear any explicitly oracular title but were simply called priests. Female titles are very seldom attested, thus divination was more of a male activity, contrary to Delphi or Didyma's cases, where only women prophesied for Apollo.

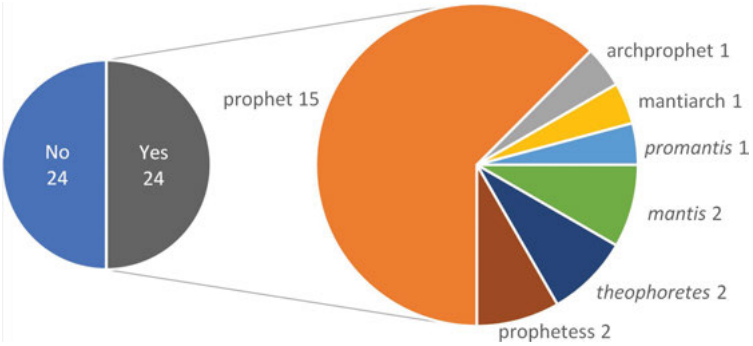

Fig. 3: Oracular staff of the "small" oracular sanctuaries attested in Anatolia (© Bouillot).

A fourth and last remarkable point is that only 10 of the 46 oracular sanctuaries can today be associated with at least one oracular response recorded by literature or epigraphy. This low figure is of course partly due to the documentation itself. But it also shows the lack of interest of the Ancients for the exact word of these divine answers. Anatolian epigraphy attests dozens, perhaps hundreds of consultations by private consultants (i. e. through the dedications "after an oracle"). However, not a single of the received answers has reached us, showing that most (if not all) of the consultants of these oracles must have been too poor and/or their motives of consultations too private to have it inscribed on stone. Only cities sometimes had the answer inscribed.[47] Literature was more interested in the preservation of exact oracular words, but only in contexts of great politics or philosophical reflection, thus excluding private consultations again.[48] The oracles in beautiful and carefully

46 Pausanias, VII, 21, 11–13.

47 As illustrated by the oracular catalogues of Delphi (see Fontenrose 1978), Didyma (Fontenrose 1988) or Claros (Merkelbach/Stauber 1996).

48 As illustrated by Herodotus: Crahay 1956.

preserved iambic verses seem to have been constructed more by literary tradition than by the actual and daily practice of oracular sanctuaries.

3 Mapping and (Re)defining Oracular Sanctuaries: Some Conclusions

Such a number of oracles and such a variety in their main characteristics eventually question our vision of the oracular phenomenon, and the operational definition historians use when studying such sanctuaries. They also allow some reflection on the geography of these sanctuaries and their distribution at the Anatolian scale, in relation with the *ERC MAP*.

3.1 A Geography of Anatolian Oracular Sanctuaries

It is no surprise that the geographical distribution of oracular sanctuaries in Anatolia matches the population density of ancient Anatolia and the density of the available documentation, with a West-East gradient, from the more populated, more urbanised, more Hellenised, more excavated Aegean coast, to the less populated, urbanised, Hellenised, excavated Central and Eastern Anatolia[49] (Fig. 4). But a more detailed study of the distribution of these oracles also shows their almost systematic proximity to the main ancient traffic routes (whether land, river or sea ones). Only 5 of the 46 documented oracular sanctuaries are located more than 20 km (a day's walking distance) away from the sea and / or what seems to be the main ancient traffic routes. It is possible that other, more distant, more isolated shrines also existed but still elude the available documentation. But it is also probable that the development of the oracular function of a sanctuary was linked to its ability to attract consultants beyond its immediate geographical area, either through its own influence or by taking advantage of the circulation of populations through its civic territory.

All these elements therefore make it possible to put the historical profile of the oracular sanctuary into perspective. Variety prevailed in all domains, in terms of oracular divinities, divinatory method, oracular staff, size of the sanctuary, or geographic influence. If some of these Anatolian oracular sanctuaries could be compared to Didyma, Claros or even Delphi, others were small local sanctuaries, relying on a small population pool and a limited number of consultants.

49 Again, on ancient Anatolia and its geography, history and demography, see Mitchell 1993, but also Sartre 2004, 228–258.

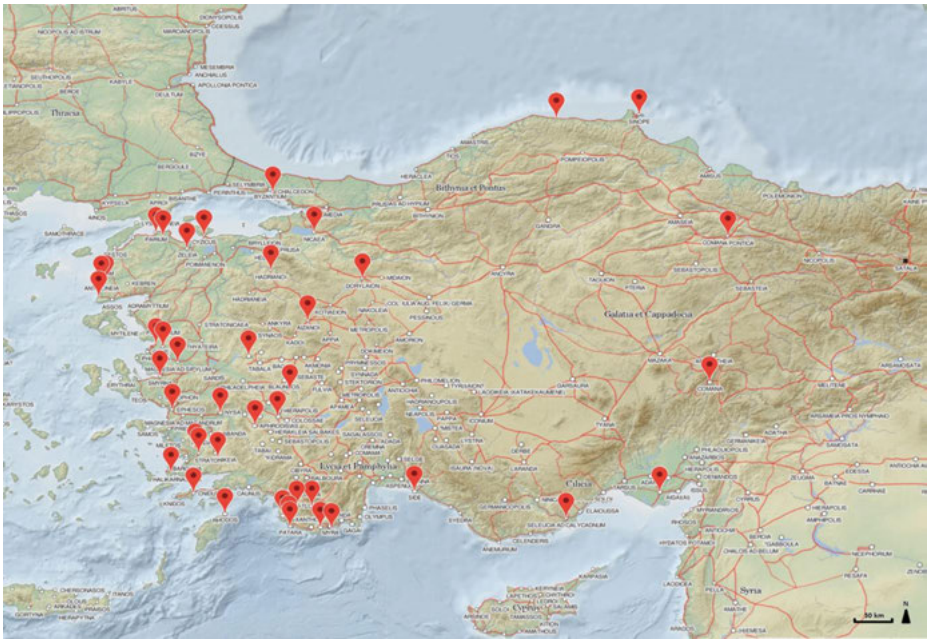

Fig. 4: Attested "small" oracular sanctuaries in Anatolia (© Bouillot / base map from Pelagios.org).

3.2 Reconsidering the Definition of Oracular Sanctuaries After the Anatolian Case

Auguste Bouché-Leclercq proposed three essential criteria for the qualification of a sanctuary as an oracle: *un dieu inspirateur ; un sacerdoce qui soit lui-même ou qui gouverne l'organe de l'inspiration divine ; et un lieu où la tradition ait enraciné les rites prophétiques*.[50] These three points were obviously defined according to the Delphic example and its extensive ancient documentation.[51] They are valid for the smaller Anatolian oracular sanctuaries as well, but their identification is not always possible for poorly documented sanctuaries. Furthermore, in the light of these new and numerous examples, the oracular phenomenon appears much more complex than the great oracles were and that modern historiography long thought. Bouché-Leclercq's ternary definition is therefore not sufficient to identify and encompass the whole phenomenon. By requiring the preliminary identification of the three criteria, it leads historians to exclude from the catalogue all the sanctuaries for which one or two of these elements cannot be attested for lack of documentation. Furthermore, it focuses

50 Bouché-Leclercq 1879–1882, 429.

51 For example the extended description of Delphi by Pausanias, X, 9–16.

on the characteristics of the sanctuary which are only the consequence and not the very essence of its function.

Therefore any sanctuary which, whatever its importance, wealth, architecture, god, or geographical influence, has adopted ritual, human and mythical frameworks aimed at facilitating and highlighting oracular activities – that is to say, mediated access to the divine, allowing questions to be addressed and answers to be received – should be considered oracular. This definition includes all these Anatolian sanctuaries, large, medium, small or very small, whose inspiring god, prophetic rites or oracular priesthoods we do not always know, but whose oracular markers indicate they had sought to give themselves this privileged mode of communication with the divine.

This redefinition therefore insists on the internal initiative, specific to priests, worshippers, cities, and which resulted in the establishment and enhancement of divinatory rites leading to the qualification of the sanctuary as oracle. Such a definition raises the question of the reasons, modalities and origins of this initiative. But these reasons are systematically hidden behind a founding myth, readily transmitted by literary documentation and eluding the human reasons.[52] Why have these forty-six Anatolian sanctuaries made the choice, at some point in their history, to develop and enhance these divinatory rites and fixed them for centuries while justifying it with a mythical construction? The advantage, in terms of number of consultant-worshipers and therefore offerings, is quite obvious. But responding with this "economic" argument means turning the question around: why have other non-oracular sanctuaries refused this specialisation, if it brought so much and was that easy? The significant number and various sizes of Anatolian oracle sanctuaries show this specialisation was not uncommon and did not require specific and uniform conditions. All sanctuaries are, after all, places of privileged contact with the divine. All are therefore potential oracles, even if only a minority – albeit much larger than has long been thought – have actually taken the plunge. To answer the question of these "reasons" for the oracle thus appears impossible today, for lack of documentation first, and because the answer was undoubtedly not one and uniform, but specific to each sanctuary, whether "it" made that choice or not.

Conclusion

Studying Anatolian oracular sanctuaries means considering dozens of sites, each having its own history, origins (including non-Greek ones sometimes), myths, traditions and rites. Even though considering all of them in details is impossible here,

52 As illustrated by the myth of Delphi, for instance narrated by Strabo, IX, 1, 12.

drawing some conclusions about the overall Anatolian catalogue and then about the Greek oracular phenomenon in general is possible.

1. Oracles were much less rare than historians have long thought, and could actually be found everywhere, at every scale and in connection with a very large number of gods.
2. Variety seems to be the only rule in oracular matters, and no dominant pattern can be identified, except for a certain domination of Apollo and the male prophets.
3. All this leads, once again, to reconsider the place made by the Greeks for divination, which was neither anecdotal, nor irrational, as Jean-Pierre Vernant already showed.[53]
4. Eventually, the "oracular sanctuary" category, though useful and operative for us, was not that clearly defined for the Ancients, who seemed to admit a certain fluidity and left many doors open.

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53 Vernant 1974, opposing Halliday and Dodds's vision: Dodds 1951, 7–10 and Halliday 1913, 40–97.

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