

Delphi: The bellybutton of the ancient world

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Look beyond simply the famed oracular priestess breathing in hallucinogenic gases and you find a place whose past speaks directly to the 21st century.

That is the argument of Cambridge University's Dr Michael Scott who is researching how and why Delphi, a small Greek town and religious sanctuary perched on a difficult to reach mountainside, was for 1,000 years the proclaimed 'omphalos', the 'bellybutton', the very centre of the ancient world.

Famed for its oracle at the Temple of Apollo, he is also examining the evidence of Delphi's many other gods, athletic and musical games and the monuments to unity - as well as civil war - that crowded its religious

sanctuaries.

Dr Scott, who tonight presents the BBC 4 documentary - Delphi: Bellybutton of the Ancient World (9pm), uses the latest architectural plans of the temple of Apollo (published July 2010), which reveal for the first time archaeological traces of what may have been the oracular priestess's consultation room inside the temple.

He also argues that the town, which drew kings and emperors as well as cities and commoners from all corners of the Mediterranean world and beyond, still speaks as powerfully to us today as it did in the past.

He said: "Imagine a place with the wealth of the Swiss banks, the religious power of the Vatican, the advertising potential of the World Cup and the historical importance of all the world's museums combined; that was Delphi.

"And its two great maxims: 'Know Thyself' and 'Nothing in Excess', can be applied to modern life as easily as they could to the [ancient Greeks](#).

"The excitement surrounding Paul the octopus forecasting World Cup results shows that - despite the very different world in which we now live - we are every bit as fascinated by the concept of knowing the future as the people who made their way to speak to the Oracle at Delphi. We would all like to know what the future has in store for us. In that, perhaps the most important thing Delphi teaches us is to look inward, to answer the important questions ourselves, to 'know thyself'.

"Equally, the message of 'Nothing in Excess', at a time of financial ruin and global recession, could barely strike a greater chord; that is why Delphi and its 1,000 years as the centre of the ancient world is so important today."

The discovery of Delphi, begun over 100 years ago when excavators had to remove the entire modern community on top of the ancient site, continues unabated to this day. In the 1990s, geologists proved the presence of hallucinogenic gases at Delphi.

Dr Scott's own research (published by Cambridge University Press in 2010: *Delphi and Olympia*) provides a new assessment of the many monuments within the sanctuary which gave Delphi its unique character, value and place in the ancient world.

Dr Scott added: "What fascinates me is the duality of Delphi. It was a place that brought people together and yet made their victories over each other equally clear. In that, it reflects the complex realities of our own modern day international organisations, like the EU and UN, with which Delphi has often been compared.

"Delphi was made a World Heritage Site because of its 'enduring mission to bring together men and women who otherwise remain divided by material interest' (ICOMOS). Today, it continues to do that, but at the same time it does more. It reminds us, by providing a visual monumental history book of the ancient world, of the limits and realities of our own humanity. In giving us a fascinating window into the past, it also opens up a window for understanding ourselves."

Provided by University of Cambridge

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