

Messenger, Prophet, Poet, Bee:

An exploration of bees as intermediaries of the divine and their relation to divine inspiration in Ancient Greek Religious Practice

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Bees in Ancient Greek religion can be linked to the phenomena of prophecy and the inspiration of poetry. Acting as liminal bodies representing the soul, bees play an integral part in the conveyance of divine thought to mortals. In Ancient Greek Mythology, both poetry and prophecy are derived from the will of Zeus. Whereas prophecy arrives to mortal men through an intermediary of the divine, the oracle, a being who can ‘travel’ across the three planes of existence, poetry comes into being through mortal men who are imbued with divine spirit. Both arts are moved by bees and their honey. I will argue in this paper that bees can be thought of as intermediaries of the divine, acting much like souls or daimones except that they deliver the will of the Gods unto men in Ancient Greek religious practice.

Bees are frequently seen as the physical manifestation of the soul in Ancient Greek mythology.¹ Pausanias tells of the myth of the priestess Melissa who, upon refusing to tell the secret rites of Demeter, is torn apart by her fellow women.² Demeter, enraged at the death of her priestess, casts a plague on the women and causes bees to fly out of Melissa’s body. Several scholars, including Arthur Bernard Cook, argue that this myth points to a semantic link between bees and the immortal soul.³ We can also identify a link between bees and the immortal soul in Aeneid.6.707:

ac veluti in pratis ubi apes aestate serena
floribus insidunt variis et candida circum
lilia funduntur, strepit omnis murmure campus.
-Vergil, Aen. 6.707-709

And just as when in the meadows, where bees land upon various flowers in the serene summer and are poured around the shining white lilies, the whole field resounds with a buzzing.

¹ This association is derived from the Melissa myth as told above. However, bees are also pictured as intermediary vessels for the soul to reside in after living a particularly good life in the mortal realm. This belief stems from Plato’s Phaedo where Socrates argues that philosophical and spiritual beings will be reincarnated in a bee, wasp, ant, or human and that worthy men will spring from them. Therefore, we encounter a Platonic inference of bees as intermediaries of the divine and of the soul. We can assume that the Aristotelian discussion of bees and the soul derives from this line of Platonic thinking.

² Serv. Verg., Aeneid 1.43

³ Arthur Bernard Cook, ‘The Bee in Greek Mythology’ in The Journal of Hellenic Studies, Vol. 15, (The Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies, 1895). pp.19.

The scene takes place during Aeneas' katabasis to the underworld. Vergil compares the souls along the Lethe to bees swarming in a field. Just as the bees buzz around in a pack, so to do the wandering souls murmur in the underworld. This comparison highlights the connection of bees to souls and the dead. Vergil furthers the concept by introducing bees within two planes: metaphorical bees are taking space in the mortal realm whilst the allegory, the souls, are also taking space in the immortal realm, the underworld. I would argue that Vergil's identification of bees with the immortal soul derives from a prior Ancient Greek tradition in the canon of mythology where bees take on the same allegory. Indeed, the myth of Glaucus, the son of Minos, also engages with themes of the soul and liminality. The myth, which is found in Apollodorus⁴ and Hyginus⁵, bears several points of importance for the connection of bees to the immortal soul:

Then Minos said to him: "According to the words of Apollo, you should be able to restore my son to me." While Polyidus was observing omens, he saw an owl sitting over the wine-cellar and putting bees to flight. He interpreted the omen, and brought out the lifeless boy from the jar. Minos said to him: "You have found the body. Now restore life to it." When Polyidus said this was impossible, Minos ordered him to be shut in a tomb with the boy, and a sword placed there. When they had been shut in, a snake suddenly made for the body of the boy, and Polyidus, judging the creature wished to devour the body, suddenly drew the sword and killed it. Another snake, seeking its mate, saw that it was dead, and came and brought an herb, and its touch restored life to the dead snake. Polyidus did the same. When they called out from within, a passerby reported it to Minos, who opened the tomb and found his son safe. He sent Polyidus many gifts back into his country.

Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 136

Apollodorus speaks of the bees attempting to find their way into the storeroom where Glaucus' body is found. This is evidence of the soul attempting to find its way back to Glaucus, acting as an inversion of the Melissa myth told by Pausanias. Moreover, the honey acts as a preservative whilst Minos is searching for his son's whereabouts. Glaucus appears to exist in between a state of life and death as he is obviously not alive but does not decompose as natural dead things should. Therefore, the honey acts as a casing, placing Glaucus in a liminal state between the mortal plane and the plane of the underworld.⁶ Therefore, the mythological evidence gestures to bees and honey acting as representatives for the immortal soul, being able to transgress the boundaries of the mortal and immortal, and more importantly, as intermediaries of the divine.

If we conceive of the bee as a representation of the immortal soul, we can then begin to explore the liminal nature of bees, a key characteristic in the imbuing of prophecy and poetry. The myth of Glaucus and the honey pot exemplifies the liminal nature of bees and honey in Ancient Greek mythology. Moreover, we have seen in Vergil's discourse on bees that they too can travel to the underworld. Bees appear to be able to operate within a multitude of realms, much like Dionysos or Hermes Psychopompos, the deity associated with taking souls down to

⁴ Apollodorus Library, 3.3.1

⁵ Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 136 (translated by Mary Grant (1960))

⁶ R Rachel D Carlson, *Apian Imagery in Classical Studies*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015). p.28

the underworld. If we were to take a more naturalistic approach, we can look to Pliny's *Natural History*. 11.5. Pliny's chapter on bees identifies them as "neither wild nor tame",⁷ a natural liminality. Thus, bees appear to act as liminal bodies, able to transgress the three planes just as a divine body is known to do.

After establishing bees as liminal bodies, we must explore the relationship with prophecy. Prophecy should be understood as the manifestation of Zeus' will through a vehicle, most often an oracle. The act of receiving prophecy represents a movement from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge. This is much like the transgression from the mortal to immortal plane made by the bees.

However, prophecy can also be likened to a katabasis. Prophecy and katabasis is linked through the practice of hero worship. Heroes could take on divine qualities, becoming daimones or divine intermediaries, just like bees. These daimones are specifically differentiated from theoi (gods) and androi (men), occupying a median between divine and mortal. This median space can also be referred to as an intermediary of the divine. The Cult of Amphiaraus is one such hero cult set up to one of the seven heroes against Thebes. Amphiaraus was swallowed into the earth but made immortal by Zeus.⁸ This earthly descent can be counted as a katabasis but more importantly, Amphiaraus became a chthonic deity or daimon that resides beneath the earth and can give prophecy to those who pray at his shrine. Thus, the connection between hero cults, prophecy and the nature of the daimon are linked.

Another example of a daimon residing within a hero cult is the cult of Trophonius. The cult of Trophonius was built after a prophecy from the Delphic Oracle informed the Lebadaeans of an unhappy daimon living on a hill. One day, a shepherd boy was following a swarm of bees in search of honey. The boy followed the bees into a hole in the ground and discovered the daimon. We must acknowledge the presence of bees within the story. The bees appear to undertake the katabasis first and the boy follows, demonstrating another example of the ability of bees to cross liminal thresholds. The bees acted as the guides, suggesting an affinity with prophecy. Just as the heroes become daimones capable of giving prophecy, so to do bees become intermediaries of the divine, essentially becoming daimones, capable of crossing planes and prophesising.

Prophecy, as aforementioned, is the conveyance of the will of Zeus, a divine phenomenon that bees play a role in this as well as the messenger itself. Wilhelm Heinrich Roscher writes of Zeus having been nursed by a she-goat and fed honey by bees whilst in his youth.⁹ Indeed, this is backed up by Antoninus Liberalis who writes that bees were "the nurses of Zeus".¹⁰ Bees therefore touch the lips of Zeus whose spoken word becomes reality. This connection explains why the Pythia, the oracle at Delphi, was often known as the "Delphic Bee".¹¹ The 'bee' takes on the role of messenger, transporting the word of Zeus to the mortal realm as the 'Delphic Bee'. The bees' honey touches the lips of Zeus and transgresses to the human realm, to the Pythia who then in turn conveys these words to mortal men. It is sensible to assume that the mortal oracles 'imbibe' the word of Zeus and therefore, the bees' divine honey. This consumption of nectar, the divine food of the gods which has been related to honey and mead by several scholars¹², allows

⁷ Pliny.NH.11.5

⁸ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1. 34. 2

⁹ Roscher, W. H. (1883) *Nektar und Ambrosia: Mit einem Anhang über die Grundbedeutung der Aphrodite und Athene*. Leipzig, pp.2638

¹⁰ Antoninus Liberalis.Met.Syn.19

¹¹ Pin.Pyth.4.60

¹² Hilda Ransome, *The Sacred Bee in Ancient Times and Folklore*, (London: Dover Publications, 1939). pp.155-175.

the oracle to transgress the material and immaterial planes as intermediaries of the divine. Bees are also presented as the conveyor of prophecy in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes as Apollo gives Hermes “lesser prophecy” in the shape of three bee maidens who are priestesses devoted to Apollo.

ἄλλο δέ τοι ἐρέω, Μαίης ἐρικυδέος νιῆ
καὶ Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο, θεῶν ἐριούνιε δαῖμον:
σεμναὶ γὰρ τινες εἰσί, κασίγνηται γεγαυῖαι,
παρθένοι, ὠκείησιν ἀγαλλόμεναι πτερύγεσσι,
τρῆϊς: κατὰ δὲ κρατὸς πεπαλαγμένοι ἄλφιστα λευκά,
555 οἰκία ναιετάουσιν ὑπὸ πτυχί Παρνησοῖο,
μαντεῖης ἀπάνευθε διδάσκαλοι, ἦν ἐπὶ βουσί
παῖς ἔτ' ἐὼν μελέτησα: πατὴρ δ' ἐμὸς οὐκ ἀλέγιζεν,
ἐντεῦθεν δὴ ἔπειτα ποτώμεναι ἄλλοτε ἄλλη
κηρία βόσκονται καὶ τε κραίνουσιν ἕκαστα.
560 αἶ δ' ὅτε μὲν θυῖωσιν ἐδηδυῖαι μέλι γλωρόν,
προφρονέως ἐθέλουσιν ἀληθείην ἀγορεύειν:
ἦν δ' ἀπονοσφισθῶσι θεῶν ἠδέϊαν ἐδωδήν,
ψεύδονται δὴ ἔπειτα δι' ἀλλήλων δονέουσαι.

But I will tell you another thing, Son of all-glorious Maia and Zeus who holds the aegis, luck-bringing genius of the gods. There are certain holy ones, sisters born —three virgins gifted with wings: their heads are besprinkled with white meal, and they dwell under a ridge of Parnassus. These are teachers of divination apart from me, the art which I practised while yet a boy following herds, though my father paid no heed to it. From their home they fly now here, now there, feeding on honey-comb and bringing all things to pass. And when they are inspired through eating yellow honey, they are willing to speak truth; but if they be deprived of the gods' sweet food, then they speak falsely, as they swarm in and out together
Homeric Hymn to Hermes 550-564

The bee maidens in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo are described as the “teachers of divination... apart from me” where “me” refers to Apollo himself.¹³ Once again, bees are described as the conveyors of prophetic skill. Indeed, the hymn also details that “when they are inspired through eating yellow honey, they are willing to speak truth”.¹⁴ Thus, the consumption of honey, on which Zeus was also nursed, conveys the art of prophecy to the bee-maidens themselves. Susan Scheinberg affirms this theory, commenting that “In Greek cult practice, the god was sometimes held to enter the body of the inspired mortal through a sacred liquid.”¹⁵ Indeed, hydromanteia, the practice of drinking liquid to attain divine inspiration, was common in Ancient Greece and reportedly even Delphi.¹⁶ I would argue that the ‘divine inspiration’ in question can act as a

¹³ HHH.556

¹⁴ HHH.560-1

¹⁵ Susan Scheinberg, *The Bee Maidens of the Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, pp.16

¹⁶ *ibid.*

consumption of Zeus himself, suggesting that oracles can become a divine being, filled with the god and spewing prophecy.¹⁷ Therefore, there appears to be a direct link between the consumption of honey, quasi-divinity amongst oracles, and the divine inspiration of prophecy.

The consumption of honey not only inspired prophecy but also poets. The earliest poets such as Pindar and Hesiod were said to have been nurtured on honey from a young age.¹⁸ This suggests that the divinely-inspired nature of their words and the very sweetness of their work is directly linked to the divine messengers, bees, and their honey. Linguistically, the link between the sweetness of poetry and the taste of honey is made early on in Ancient Greece. Carlson states that “the stem for honey (μελι-) appears throughout early Greek poetry, in words used to describe the poetic craft and successful and pleasing poets and poetry, terms such as μελιγάρυς ("sweet-voiced"), and μελίγλωσσος ("honey-tongued”).”¹⁹ This suggests that the Ancient Greeks equated mellifluousness with divinity, creating an argument for the poet as an intermediary of the divine. Even the Delphic Bee sang the will of Zeus in hexameter, a crossover of poetry and prophecy under the influence of honey.

To speak of bees as intermediaries of the divine requires us to finally dwell on what divinity is in relation to *androi*. As seen in the many mortal challenges to divine figures, the gap between gods and humans is unbridgeable.²⁰ It is impossible for man to become wholly divine within a Greek religious context, just as it is impossible for a god to become wholly mortal. However, as we have seen in the *daimones*, there appears to be messengers or ambassadors of the divine who can commune with the mortal. These messengers transport the essence of the divine to the mortal realm and impart it unto mortals. We have little understanding of what constitutes *daimones*. I would argue that *daimones* occupy the same space as the soul and that bees are practically *daimones* that we may also encounter as materialisations of the soul. Therefore, souls can be viewed as the mortal realisation of divinity. Souls, which Platonic thought informs us can travel between the three planes, imbibe the body with character and human essence, just as bees or *daimones* can imbibe the soul with divine essence. This new understanding of bees within the Greek Religious context thus elucidates the academic conversation around the nature of the soul within divinity. The soul becomes an intermediary of the divine, the closest substance to divinity that *androi* can grasp. Bremmer is still correct in arguing that man cannot bridge the gap to the divine. However, we can now begin to explore how part of the essence of man, namely the soul, is used within Platonic and Aristotelian thought

¹⁷ ‘Mad Honey’ is the colloquial name given to honey made from rhododendron plants due to its intoxicating and occasionally poisonous effects. A very rare group of toxins, known as Grayanotoxin, is found in the rhododendron plant and therefore, is passed along to the honey itself. Mad Honey can cause a very rare poisonous reaction that can cause vomiting and dizziness in small doses but muscular weakness and loss of coordination as well as a contraction of the diaphragm in higher doses. Some scholars, such as Scheinberg, have argued that Mad Honey may have played a part in bringing about the psychoactive hallucinogenic states that the oracles were seized by. Pliny, Xenophon, and Strabo have all remarked on the properties of Mad Honey. However, I would argue that, much like Daryn Lehoux’s disregard of hallucinogenic gasses at Delphi (The Classical World, Vol.101, No.1, 2007, pp.41-56), Mad Honey is a scientific theory to explain away a spiritual and religious phenomenon. In this case, I don’t believe the proof is necessary.

¹⁸ Arthur Bernard Cook, ‘The Bee in Greek Mythology’ in The Journal of Hellenic Studies, Vol. 15, (The Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies, 1895). pp.53-60

¹⁹ Rachel D Carlson, *Apian Imagery in Classical Studies*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015). pp.43-44

²⁰ Jan N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). p.12. - Bremmer discusses the division of god and human in his text on Greek Religion. Some of the examples of mortal challenges include Ariadne challenging Athena to weaving, Semele challenging Zeus to reveal his mortal form, and Marysas questioning Apollo’s flute-playing. All end in disaster for the mortal.

to commune with the divine and transcend the previously untraversable gap between man and divine.

Bees occupy an unusual space within Ancient Greek religious practice. They operate within liminalities and move through spaces rather than occupy them; they appear to occupy the spaces in between. They appear both alive and dead, wild and tame, divine and chthonic. Bees appear as quasi-Hermes figures travelling through the three planes of existence. They appear as quasi-Zeus figures as they convey prophecy. They appear quasi-Bacchic as they intoxicate and divinely inspire. Ultimately, bees are intermediaries of the divine and are creatures not bound by mortality. They symbolise the intersection of gods and man and act as ambassadors between the planes of the immortal and the mortal.

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