

called the oracles. Also there were twenty-two oracles of Apollo in the different parts of Greece and a much smaller number of Zeus. There were usually in wild and desolate localities.

The most renowned of the oracles were that of Pelasgian Zeus at Dodona, in Epirus, and that of Apollo at Delphi in Phocis. At Dodona the priests listened in the gloomy forests for the voice of Zeus in the rustling leaves of their sacred oak. At Delphi there was a deep cavity in the ground which emitted stupefying vapors, that were thought to be the inspiring breath of Apollo. Over the spot was erected a splendid temple in honor of the god. The revelations were generally received by a priestess, seated on a tripod placed over the orifice. Among the Greeks scarcely any undertaking was entered upon without the will and sanction of the oracle being first sought. Some of the responses of the oracle contained plain and wholesome advice; but very many of them, particularly those that implied knowledge of the future, were obscure and ambiguous, in order to correspond with the event, however affairs should turn, and thus the credit of the oracle would be unimpaired. Thus, Croesus was told that, that if he undertook his expedition against Persia, he would destroy a great empire. He did indeed—but the empire was his own. To the Greeks, life was so bright and joyous that they looked on death as a great calamity; except in the case of a favored few, as being hopeless and aimless. Homer makes the shade of the great Achilles in hades to say:—

“I would be a laborer on earth, and serve for hire some man of mean estate, who makes scant cheer, rather than reign o’er all who have gone down to death.”

The celebrated games of the Greeks had their origin in the belief of their Aryan ancestors, that the souls of the dead were gratified by such spectacles as delighted them during their earthly life. During the heroic age these games were only performed at the tomb or about the pyre of the dead. Gradually they grew into religious festivals; the whole community assisted, and they were celebrated near the shrine or oracle of the god in whose honor they were instituted. The idea was that the gods were present at the festival, and took delight in the various contests.

By the sixth century B. C. they had lost their local and assumed a national character. Among these festivals, four acquired a wide-world celebrity. These were the Olympian, celebrated in honor of Zeus, at Olympia in Peloponnesus; the Pythian in honor of Apollo, near his shrine and oracle at Delphi; the