

Document name: The Amphiareion: an introductory guide
Document date: 2023
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OpenLearn course: Exploring ancient Greek religion
OpenLearn url: <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/exploring-ancient-greek-religion/content-section-0>



The Amphiareion: an introductory guide

The Open University

Concealed in a wooded grove at the town of Oropos, northeast **Attica**, is the Amphiareion (Figure 1). The Amphiareion is an ancient Greek sanctuary in honour of Amphiaraos, a mythological hero who was later worshipped as a god.



Figure 1 Aerial view of the Amphiareion, Oropos, northeast Attica.

In ancient Greek mythology, Amphiaraos was one of the Seven Against Thebes: that is, one of the seven captains leading **Argos'** war against **Thebes** to restore Polynices, the son of Oedipus, as king there (Figure 2). Amphiaraos was renowned for his fate of being engulfed by the earth – together with his chariot – when he took flight from the Theban expedition.



Figure 2 Fragment of a mixing bowl (volute-krater) depicting the departure of Amphiaraos (depicted standing with a shield and spear) to Thebes; from Apulia, Italy; c. 330 BCE. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 61.113; 14cm (height) x 17cm (width).

The Athenians (the native residents of Athens and Attica) probably founded the Amphiareion in the late fifth century BCE. However, the sanctuary itself was located just outside the city of Oropos, a small and politically-weak territory wedged between Attica and **Boiotia** (Map 1). The people of Oropos (known as the Oropians) often struggled for independence and their status was entangled with that of the Amphiareion. The people of Attica and Boiotia competed for control of the shrine of Amphiaraos and the town of Oropos for a long period of time, but ancient writers tell us very little about the sanctuary and the land in which it was situated.



Map 1 Map of Attica and Central Greece; 'X' marks the Amphiareion.

Passages from the fifth-century BCE historian Herodotus inform us that Amphiaraos once had a famous dream **oracle** (Herodotus, *Histories* 1.46.2-3, 1.49. 1.52, 8.134.1-2), where people could seek divine guidance from the god by going to sleep at his sanctuary. However, surviving fragments of the comedian Aristophanes' play *Amphiaraos* reveal that by 411 BCE Amphiaraos' sanctuary was now a popular healing shrine – though it still seems that dreaming was an important way to communicate with the god (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Cast of a dedication depicting a male youth being healed by Amphiaraos in a dream, c. fourth century BCE.

As for Oropos, literary texts make mostly passing reference to the town's entanglement with Attic-Boiotian conflict in the Classical era, that is the period c. 478-323 BCE (e.g. Thucydides 2.23.3, 8.60.1; Xenophon, *Hellenica* 7.4.1; Diodorus Siculus 14.17.1-4). However, the physical remains of the Amphiareion, which was first excavated in the late nineteenth century, allow us to bring to life the chequered history of this sanctuary and its affiliated small city. These remains consist of both the sanctuary's archaeological ruins and the various monuments displayed within its setting.

The sanctuary of Amphiaraos consisted of a grand theatre (Figure 4) and a large **stoa** (Figure 5) that hosted competitions of the famous interstate games celebrated there, the Great Amphiaraia.

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Figure 4 Remains of the theatre of the Amphiareion.



Figure 5 Remains of the stoa of the Amphiareion.

The closing event of this festival paid **homage** to the mythological tradition of Amphiaraos. Charioteers competed by leaping in and out of their moving chariots and victors set up **reliefs** depicting this competition to commemorate their success (Figure 6).



Figure 6 Dedication depicting the chariot dismount competition.

The games were a focal point and drew visitors from all over the Mediterranean to the sanctuary. The Athenians and later the Romans **patronised** and **aggrandised** the games as a way of asserting their authority to the outside world during the periods of their control of the Amphiareion.

But by far the most notable aspect of the Amphiareion is the wealth of monuments and inscriptions (that is, texts carved onto stone which recorded the actions and decisions of individuals and communities relating to the sanctuary) displayed there between the fifth century BCE and third century CE. These inscriptions, of which there are roughly 500, offer perspectives into the interactions that went on at the sanctuary between Athenians, **Boiotians**, Oropians and later Romans. Such artifacts from the past lift the shrine and the town of Oropos from their relative

obscurity in literary narrative by telling a story of how external competition – and internal resistance to it – was expressed in monumental form. They also importantly tell us how individuals and cities viewed the cult of Amphiaraos and the ways in which they sought to identify with it.

Glossary

Aggrandise	to increase the size, power, or reputation of a thing.
Argos	an ancient Greek city-state located in the Peloponnese.
Attica	the name given to the region which comprises Athens and its countryside.
Boitoia	the name given to the region of central Greece which bordered with Attica to the southeast. The region was made up of several city-states.
Boiotians	the name given to native inhabitants of the region of Boiotia.
Homage	the expression of respect or high regard.
Oracle	a response given by a divinity when consulted at an oracular site (usually a sanctuary).
Patronise	the act of promoting or sponsoring something either financially or through some other means.
Relief, reliefs	a type of artwork, such as a sculpture, in which moulded shapes and images jut out from a flat background.
Stoa	a long, open building whose roof is usually supported by one or more rows of columns. At the Amphiareion, visitors slept in dormitories at either end of the stoa in order to consult the god in their sleep.
Thebes	a city-state located within the region of Boiotia.

List of ancient works cited

Aristophanes, *Amphiaraos* (a lost play which now only survives as fragments)
Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* (14.17.1-4)
Herodotus, *Histories* (1.46.2-3, 1.49. 1.52, 8.134.1-2)
Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (2.23.3, 8.60.1)
Xenophon, *Hellenica* (7.4.1)

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Figures 3, 4 and 5: courtesy of Dr Alexandra Wilding

Figure 6: Ealdgyth; <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>; from <https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juegos>

Map 1: taken from Plato-dialogues, Bernard SUZANNE