One of the enduring missions of Delphi is to bring together men and women who otherwise remain divided by material interests.

—Memorandum of Justification

PROLOGUE: *Why Delphi?*

The love affair began, it was said, during the sacrifices in honor of the hero Neoptolemus. It was conducted in secret: the woman was already promised in marriage to someone else within the community. Eventually, the two young lovers decided to flee. They were helped to escape by a priest, and traveled to the farthest reaches of the Mediterranean world, where, after facing numerous trials and tribulations, they emerged triumphant and together.

This is the plot of an ancient Greek novel written by a man called Heliodorus. The two lovers came from Delphi, a small city and religious sanctuary clinging to the Parnassian mountains of central Greece, but which was also known throughout antiquity as the very center, the omphalos, the “belly-button,” of the ancient world. It is from this omphalos that these two lovers escaped, aided by a priest, not of Apollo who ruled at Delphi, but of the Egyptian god Isis. And it was to Memphis in Egypt, to the extremes of the ancient Greek world that the two lovers traveled, where, eventually, the couple themselves became priest and priestess of the god of the Sun, Helios, and of the Moon, Selene.

Heliodorus’s fictional novel creates a picture of a vast and yet connected world with Delphi at its center, to which the priests of Egyptian...
deities were welcomed and feted, and in which inhabitants of Delphi could become priests of deities worshiped at the boundaries of the ancient Mediterranean world. In the novel, Delphi is praised as a place ruled by Apollo, but where a plethora of other gods are honored; it is hailed as a place to which philosophers flock from all over the ancient world to perfect their wisdom secluded from the maddening crowds; and it is described by the priest of Isis, as he approached Delphi for the

Figure 0.1. The ancient sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi in its immediate landscape, hidden from the Itean plain below within the folds of the Parnassian mountains (© EFA/P. Amandry [Aupert FD II Stade fig. 23]) 1 Gulf of Itea. 2 Itean plain. 3 Museum of Delphi. 4 Sanctuary of Delphi. 5 Zig-zag ‘sacred way’ path through Apollo sanctuary.
first time, as a divine location, resembling a fortress that Nature herself had chosen to take care of.3

Anyone who has visited Delphi will recognize the reality behind the priest’s description, and particularly the way in which any sight of Delphi is denied to the visitor until the very last moment of their journey, as if the mountains themselves were protecting the city and sanctuary from view (see figs. 0.1, 0.2).4 It is only as the road sweeps you around the final jutting crag of Parnassian rock, that there, hidden, protected in the womb of the mountains, Delphi is suddenly revealed. Marble glints in the morning sunlight and glows golden at dusk. Ornate, carefully
choreographed temple columns contrast with the gray wildness of the Parnassian rock face behind. The sound of mountain spring water making its way down to the plain below reaches your ears. And you are overcome by a stillness and a sense of otherworldliness as this hidden treasure finally reveals itself to you and beckons you in. There is a magic in the air, unlike that of any other place I have visited on earth.

It is no accident that Heliodorus chose Delphi as the location for some of the key events in his novel, as it was not just a spectacular setting, but a linchpin in the framework of the ancient world for centuries, well known to the majority of that world's inhabitants. At the heart of Delphi was the temple dedicated to the god Apollo, in which sat an oracular priestess, to which people from cities and dynasties all over the Mediterranean world flocked to hear her responses to their questions about the future. Surrounding the temple of Apollo was a religious sanctuary in which a number of different divinities were worshiped and which was full of stunning artistic and architectural offerings in bronze, silver, gold, ivory, and marble dedicated to the gods by these endless visitors. And surrounding the sanctuary of Apollo was the city and community of Delphi, as well as a number of other smaller sanctuaries and the facilities in which to hold massive athletic and musical competitions (which were considered on a par with the Olympics by the ancient Greeks), and to which, for centuries, competitors traveled to compete for glory in the eyes of men and of the gods (see plates 1, 2, 3).

This book tells the story of this extraordinary place, and of its significance in the history of the ancient world. How did its famous oracle work, and why did it capture the attention of the ancient world for so long? What were the crucial factors in securing Delphi’s emergence as the predominant oracular site in a world teeming with oracles? How did the opportunities provided by offering rich dedications and taking part in athletic competitions contribute to Delphi’s importance and its role within ancient society? What, in an ancient world almost constantly beset by tectonic changes in politics and war, enabled Delphi, a small city and sanctuary clinging to the Parnassian mountains, to survive it all? What eventually caused its demise? Why was the modern world of
the nineteenth and twentieth centuries so fascinated by this ancient site, and what, if anything, can it still hold of value for us today?

The following pages tackle these questions and, in so doing, put forward a manifesto for how we should study this (and indeed other) crucial locations from the ancient world. Too often, past study of Delphi has been subdivided into its respective activities: its oracle, its dedications, its games; or into particular chronological periods of its activity, particularly its so-called golden age, that of the archaic and classical periods (650–300 BC); or into particular kinds of evidence for its role and importance (literary, epigraphic, or archaeological). These studies—while without doubt providing important, detailed, and scholarly insights into the sanctuary’s history—have often treated each of these particular activities, time periods and sources in isolation from their wider contexts, fuller histories, and complementary viewpoints. But this is not how such activities, time periods, and sources existed in the ancient world, nor indeed how they, or the site itself, were perceived in the ancient world. To see Delphi as the ancient saw it and understood it, we need to consider these multiple activities together across the sanctuary’s entire history and through the viewpoint of all the different historical sources available to us. This book seeks to offer such a perspective. It seeks to offer a global, fully rounded, view of the wide spectrum of activity that went on at Delphi across its entire lifespan, in total almost fifteen hundred years, as put forward through the complete range of source material available.

Thus, this book will highlight not only how each of Delphi’s activities had its own trajectory of highs and lows over time, but also how Delphi’s different activities impacted upon one another, as well as how Delphi’s representation varied in the different source materials. And by bringing the study of these different activities, time periods, and sources together, this linked approach will enable us to understand better than ever both how Delphi’s role and importance in the ancient world was perceived, shaped, and changed, and how and why Delphi survived for so long. We will, finally, begin to see Delphi—the omphalos of the ancient world—in full and brilliant Technicolor.
In viewing Delphi through this kind of lens, three main phases in its history become apparent, which have, in turn, become the three parts of this book. To my mind, these phases correspond to Shakespeare’s famous line in *Twelfth Night*: “some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.” In part I, “Some are born great,” we examine Delphi’s oracle and earliest history, the ways in which the ancients sought to understand Delphi’s emergence as a place born great and blessed by the gods, and the ways in which the archaeological evidence highlights a much more uncertain and difficult path to prominence. In part II, “Some achieve greatness,” we learn about the golden age of Delphi’s influence and the multiple ways in which it achieved greatness by becoming central to the ancient world. In part III, “Some have greatness thrust upon them,” we see how Delphi was heroized, as well as used, abused, and misinterpreted, and indeed how Delphi actively played up to its developing reputation, from the Hellenistic period until the time of its rediscovery in the nineteenth century, in order to understand how Delphi secured its permanent reputation as one of the great centers of the ancient world. In the epilogue and conclusion, Delphi’s story is brought to the present day, asking what value the sanctuary still holds for us and where our investigation of its extraordinary life will go next.

It is a testament to Delphi’s unparalleled tenacity and ability to survive that Heliodorus wrote his novel about the love affair at Delphi and about Delphi’s crucial place at the center of a connected Mediterranean society not in the hey-day of the classical world, but in the third or fourth centuries AD, on the cusp of the Mediterranean world’s gradual conversion to Christianity and the end of pagan sanctuaries like the one at Delphi. And yet, even in this twilight, Delphi’s description glows bright. More tellingly, Heliodorus’s description echoes that of another ancient writer, the geographer Strabo, who labeled Delphi, above all, as a *theatron*: a theater. It was a space in which most of the moments that mattered in the history of the ancient world were played out, reflected on, or altered. As a result, an understanding of the ancient world and, I would argue, of humankind itself, is incomplete without an understanding of Delphi.