

The oracle at Delphi



Comprehension

The oracle at Delphi

Delphi was a sacred place in ancient Greek times. It was high up in the mountains, and it had temples and open spaces for holding religious ceremonies. People often made the long journey to Delphi to see the famous fortune-teller, or oracle, there. The oracle at Delphi was a priestess in the temple of the god Apollon. People asked her questions, and she spoke words that were supposed to have come from Apollon himself. But these answers weren't always clear – they were more like riddles.

Leaders of cities and empires often went to Delphi to ask the oracle about how to rule their people, or make their empire more wealthy. One leader who went to Delphi was Croesus. He was king of Lydia, in Turkey, and he wanted to know if he could conquer the powerful Persian peoples who were his neighbours.

So Croesus travelled to Greece and trekked through the mountains to Delphi. Then he went to the temple of Apollon to see the oracle. Inside the temple, the priestess sat on a three-legged stool called a tripod. Croesus watched as she went into a kind of trance, and then he asked, 'Should I start a war with the Persians?'

The priestess replied in a strange voice, 'If you go to war with the Persians, a great empire will be defeated.' Croesus thought that meant he would defeat the Persians, and he was happy with this answer.

When he got back from Delphi, Croesus declared war on the Persians. His army fought the Persians in Lydia. The two armies were evenly-matched, and neither side really won the first battle. So Croesus headed back to his base to gather more supplies. But the Persians chased after his army and caught him by surprise. At this moment, Croesus realised what the oracle's message had really meant. It was not the great Persian empire that would be defeated, but his own great empire!

Understanding words

Before we can understand a story we have to know what all of the words mean. Let's try one...

a Write the sentence in which you found the word 'riddles'.

b From that sentence, suggest what 'riddles' means.

c Write a new sentence using the word 'riddles'.

d Use a dictionary to find words with a similar meaning (synonyms) to 'riddles'.

e Draw a small picture showing what you think 'riddles' means.

Try this for other words, too. 2

Finding key words

Next, we need to find the key words that tell us what the story is about...

Read the story and underline the key words. Write the most important of these key words in a list like the one below. Write next to it a word that means a similar thing (a synonym). You don't have to use all the spaces, but you should not use more.

Key word	Synonym (similar word)
Example: strange	weird

Sequencing

Sequencing means getting the events in the right order. Write these sentences in the correct order, so they make sense.

King Croesus thought the oracle meant he would defeat the Persian empire, so he went to war with the Persians.

People often went to Delphi to see the oracle.

But the Persians defeated Croesus, and then he knew what the oracle had really meant.

King Croesus went to Delphi to ask the oracle for advice.

Delphi was a sacred place with a famous oracle of Apollon.

The oracle told Croesus that a great empire would be defeated if he went to war with the Persians.

Get to the facts

1 Which god did the words of the oracle at Delphi come from?

2 Who did Croesus want to conquer?

3 What did the priestess sit on?

4 What was the oracle's reply to Croesus?

5 Where did Croesus fight the Persians?

Make a story...

When you read a description it often gives you ideas about how the event might be described differently.

Ask the oracle

Imagine you are an ancient Greek who has visited the oracle at Delphi. Write a letter to your friend telling him about what you asked the oracle, and what the oracle's answer was... (now complete the story)

Below is a plain text version for printing:

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Read the story and underline the key words. Write the most important of these key words in a list. Write next to it a word that means a similar thing (a synonym).

For example:

Key word – strange Synonym – weird

Sequencing:

Write these sentences in the correct order, so they make sense:

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