Giulia Frigerio

PhD Student at University of Kent

School of European Cultures and Languages

**The impact of the laurel on Apolline divination: affecting the mind without the use of drugs**

Many scholars argued about the possible influence of drugs on the mind of the prophets practicing Apolline divination in Ancient Greece. The laurel has been one of the first targets of such analysis in this regard, as the Pythia reportedly chewed laurel leaves before uttering oracles. The analysis conducted previously, has revealed the absence of chemical substances in the bay capable of altering the human state of mind. In this paper, I argue that the laurel did nevertheless have the power to influence the Pythia’s mind. In fact, my aim is to demonstrate the cognitive impact of the laurel on divinatory practices, arguing in favour of an agency proper of the material culture in the process. The analysis considers two case studies: the laurel in the divinatory practices at the sanctuaries of Delphi and Didyma.

The methodology followed makes use of a cognitive approach that considers both the object affordances and human neural response. These aspects are subsequently set in the correct cultural and ontological background, widely relying on primary sources. The study concludes that, despite the modality being different from the one proposed in the past, the laurel has a strong impact on divination. At Delphi, its evocative properties were fundamental for a successful divination. At Didyma, its cognitive power lies instead in the imitation of an established model, the Delphic one.

Changing the way of looking at material culture, this analysis gives a new perspective on the impact of the laurel in divinatory practices and on divination itself. By highlighting the importance of viewing objects not as passive reflections of the society, but on the contrary, as active participants that shape social practices, I propose a new way of constructing archaeological interpretations.