

# The Ancient Greek Symbolism in the Religious Landscape. The Case of Delphi

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This paper discusses the ancient Greek beliefs from a different perspective; I attempt to approach the old themes in an interdisciplinary way. I refer to the studies of French anthropology and on the ethnological studies of the conceptualization of the landscape through oral tradition. Some classical antiquity researchers have already done so. Such authors that relate to ancient Greece as a whole discuss the symbolism of sacrifices and snakes. Thus, the belief system of the community manifests in the landscape in its symbolic sense, and with this working guide, I managed to apply the abovementioned contemporary (modern) perspectives to the example of the ancient Greek Delphi.

KEYWORDS: Delphi, Pythia, Python, Apollo, omphalos, landscape, symbolism, other-world, prophecies, pneuma

## INTRODUCTION

First, as mentioned above, not much has been written on the topic of symbolism in the landscape in ancient Greece. Therefore, with an interdisciplinary method, I refer to French anthropologists, mainly Jean-Pierre Vernant, a specialist in the anthropology of ancient Greece, to ethnologist Katja Hrobat Virloget, to different historians, such as Susan Guettel Cole and Yulia Ustinova, and to archaeological evidence. By comparing their findings with the records of ancient Greek authors and the ancient Greek belief system, I applied certain conclusions to the religious landscape at Delphi, which can offer an example of the landscape symbolism, which is possible to apply to the other ancient Greek religious sites as well. This can be done by taking into account the main definitions of different symbols that can be found in the ritual sites and applying them, according to other literary (historical) evidence, to the chosen sites.

Religion played an important role in Ancient Greece. They believed that the gods had control over many different aspects of their lives. Therefore, the festivals, sacrifices, religious offerings, libations, hymns and prayers were very significant. Following the myth (Plut. *Mor. De def. or.* 409f, translated by Frank Cole Babbitt), Zeus established this site when he sought to find the centre of Mother Earth – Gaia, his grandmother.

He sent two eagles flying, one from the east and the second from the west, which later met at Delphi. Zeus then threw from the sky *omphalos* that represented the centre (navel) of the world and the entrance to the womb of Mother Earth (Parke in Wormell 1957: 1).

Delphi lies on the south-western slope of Mount Parnassus. It occupies an extensive area and is best known for its oracle, the priestess named Pythia at the sanctuary dedicated to Apollo. But Apollo was not the only god that was worshiped in the area below Mount Parnassus. In the period between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C., the cult of Gaia was dominant, but there was also the cult of Poseidon. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Apollo superseded them and established his own sanctuary. He also shared the site with his half-brother Dionysus, who had the central role for three winter months, since for that period of time, Apollo was considered absent from Delphi. In addition to those listed, there were even more divinities present at Delphi. Located on the slopes of Mount Parnassus lies the Corycian cave. It was sacred to the nymphs, muses, Dionysus and also Pan (Fontenrose 1980: 380, 411).

## DELPHIC LANDSCAPE AND ITS SYMBOLISM

### PYTHON AND ITS DUAL ROLE AT DELPHI

Archaeological evidence shows that the site was inhabited already in the 1500 B.C., by the Mycenaeans. To this period belonged goddess Gaia, for she was worshiped in Mycenaean religion. At this time all religious rituals were performed in open areas or caves. The landscape at Delphi was and still is rocky and infertile; therefore, it was necessary for people to perform fertility rituals (Coldstream 2003: 198–199; Guettel Cole 2004: 15–16).

According to *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, there was a serpent – dragon (*δράκαινα*) named Python that guarded Gaias' shrine, which extended up to the Corycian cave and all the way to the later Athena Pronaia sanctuary. The cult of snakes can be found all over Europe, and many studies have been written on this topic (Centini 1998, 49–52; Hrobat 2010: 98; Håland 2011: 124, 126). The snake symbolizes the soul of the dead; it was worshiped as a chthonic deity and the guardian spirit. They were associated with Gaia, because they come from the ground. They guard treasures, are symbols of underground power and are associated with the kingdom of the dead (Hom *Hom. Hymn. Apol.* 334–360, 370; Hrobat 2010: 90, 98, 99).

Mythologically, snakes are associated with the creation of the world; they are the symbol of Mother Earth and eternity. Greek mythology knows two types of snakes; good (*agathodaemon*) and demonic (*kakodaemon*). The snake is the most important cultic animal in Greece. Their connection with Gaia is also evident in fertility rituals, because snakes are donors of fertility. The central act of these rites, during the festivals dedicated to Mother Earth, was the descent of female participants selected for these rites into underground caverns, which represented the entrances to the womb of the Earth. They carried with themselves fertility symbols formed as female and male sex organs and also objects that represented snakes. Snakes were believed to be the guardians of these underground sanctuaries (Håland 2011: 124, 126).

The Delphic Python was the guardian of Gaias' shrine and was said to be living in the underground cavern. Ancient authors use the word *antron* (cave), by which they may refer to the chasm below the later Apollo's temple, to a nearby fissure by Castalian spring or to the Corycian cave up above on the hill. If Python lived in the underground cavern and the centre of the earth was under later Apollo's temple where the omphalos stood, I would propose that the Python, in a symbolic sense, lived in that chasm, but as it was giant, it protected all the sacred area below Mount Parnassus. From the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* we understand that Python also caused mischief to men and their sheep. Whoever met the Python on the day of doom would sweep him away, until Apollo killed him (Hom *Hom. Hymn. Apol.* 307, 334; Strab. 9.3.5; Paus. 2. 7. 7, 10. 6. 5).

Python was said to be buried under the omphalos stone and the poisonous gasses that rose from the chasm below the temple and inspired Pythia (priestess), were believed to be the breath of the Python (Fontenrose 1959: 417). Snakes are often related to the cult of water, because water and snakes are both mediums with the otherworld (Hrobat 2007: 40; Håland 2011: 124, 126). Several springs existed at Delphi, which will be further explained hereinafter.

In the case of Delphi, Python appears as a simultaneously positive and negative figure. The dragon (or dragonness as stated by Homer) guards Gaia's shrine, but again he causes mischief to men. Apparently, at Delphi, the snake has a dual, positive and negative, role.

## THE SUPERSESSION OF THE GOD APOLLO

### PYTHIA AND APOLLO: A FEMALE PRIESTESS AND A MALE GOD

After killing Gaias' dragon, Apollo left the corpse to rot, named the site Pytho (from *pythein* – to rot), and established his own sanctuary (Hom *Hom. Hymn. Apol.* 334–360, 390–530).

Then he chose the first priests; five so-called *hosioi* and two *hiereus*. There was also a priestess, an oracle named Pythia. She prophesied from the innermost part of the temple, from adyton. Pythia was a woman, chosen from the local population of Delphi. Her prophesies were inspired; ancient Greek people believed that the god Apollo spoke through Pythia (Fontenrose 1978: 219). Plutarch, who was also a priest at Delphi, writes that a god neither tells nor conceals, but indicates. Further he writes:

For he makes known and reveals his own thoughts, but he makes them known through the associated medium of a mortal body and a soul that is unable to keep quiet [...]. (Plut. *Mor. De Pyth. or.* 404e, translated by Frank Cole Babbitt)

The oracle was available nine days per year, on the seventh of each month, except for the three winter months when Apollo was absent. First, the consulates needed to organize the order of the consultation. On the day of consultations, Pythia and the inquirers needed

to be ritually purified, before they entered the sacred space. Purification rituals were held in the Castalia spring. The visitors then moved, in a strictly structured procession, towards Apollos' altar in front of the temple, where the sacrificial rituals were held. The procedure was to sprinkle water on the goat (purification of an animal). If the goat shuddered, it meant that Apollo was happy to be consulted, otherwise the oracle was closed. The goat was then sacrificed on the Apollos' altar outside the temple, participants also made other offerings and paid fees. The body parts were then burned at the Hestias' altar, which stood in the temple. Some parts of the goat were dedicated to the god, the others were consumed by humans. When the procedure was finished, the oracle was opened. Pythia then descended into the adyton; she sat on the tripod over the chasm holding laurel leaves, drank water from the spring Cassotis and prophesied (Guettel Cole 2004: 28–36; Scott 2014: 15).

At first young girls were chosen, virgins as Pythia was, but very soon they started to choose women in menopause. Diodorus Siculus from 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. reports an interesting event. He wrote that Echeocrates the Thessalian, having arrived at the shrine, fell in love with Pythia, took her with him and abused her. To prevent any such abuse in the future, the Delphians issued a law that only women in menopause should be chosen (Diod. Sic. 16.26.6). A slightly more convincing reason can be found in the definition of purity. Childbirth, death, menstruation, and sexual intercourse were interpreted as ritually polluting. This was a problem for young girls as they matured physically, and menstruation was considered pollution. Older women had no such a problem, because they were menopausal (Gentile 2009: 92).

Pythia could have been married, but she had her own house, separated from her husband. She had to live as a celibate, because she served a god. A celibate menopausal Pythia, was able to achieve the same level of ritual purity as that of young virgins, as she was pure in body (no menstruation) and detached from society. Ancient Greeks believed that the body of menopausal Pythia in celibacy, was fundamentally similar to that of a physical virgin (Dillon 2003: 37, 77; Gentile 2009: 92). We can argue that this was the reason women in menopause were chosen.

As we have seen, it was a woman who served a male god. In ancient Greece, male priests served male gods, female priestesses served female goddesses, which was not the case at Delphi. Pythia had a female predecessor (Sybil, who prophesied at the time of Gaia's cult) (Plut. *Mor. De Pyth. or.* 399a, translated by Frank Cole Babbitt). The reason I propose Pythia to be a woman is in the Delphic title "the centre of the world", which in a symbolic sense meant the entrance to the Otherworld and a boundary between worlds. In European tradition, women were believed to be the mediators with the Underworld, because they bring to the world souls, which come from the Underworld (Dragan 1999: 47). So, for the most important sanctuary in Ancient Greece, where the landscape symbolism indicates the mediators between worlds and their boundaries, I would argue that the woman was most suitable for the transmission of Apollos' messages (Malea 2017: 58).

## ANIMAL SACRIFICE AND FIRE/HESTIA

Animal sacrifice was the most important rite in Ancient Greece. The sacrifice of animals was accompanied by the incineration of grains and cakes, and was also accompanied by hymns, prayers and libations. Cakes (*pelanos*), breads, grain and fruits are all found as gifts to gods. The preparations include bathing and dressing in clean clothes. At the start, a procession is formed (Burkert 1986: 3) and its final goal is Apollo's altar in front of the temple. At Delphi, two altars were used when sacrificing; Apollo's in front of the temple and Hestia's in Apollo's temple. My point of focus here will be the importance of sacrifice in the beliefs of the Greeks. Hiera Kala analyzed vase paintings with sacrificial images of the archaic and classical periods and found that only certain parts were devoted to the gods (tail and back/spine). The parts for humans were called *splachna* and they include the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys and spleen. They were divided among people (Kala 1995: 131). As already explained by Einar Thomassen, the sacrifice connected the mortals with the gods and at the same time separated them, because they received different parts of the animals (Thomassen 2004: 277). Jan Bremmer also says that sacrificing meant communication with the gods (Bremmer 2007: 144).

Sacrifices were much more than that. The Greeks believed that they had to make offerings to the gods in order not to make them angry, because gods had peoples' destinies in their hands (Burkert 1986: 4).

The ritual sacrifices are directly related to the role of fire. Jean-Pierre Vernant identified the concept of the centre in Hestia, the goddess of the domestic heart. This is the spot where the communication between worlds is established; therefore, the domestic heart represents the omphalos (centre) of the house. The heart is placed in *oikos* or *megaron*, and the *megaron* is winding around the heart. The centre is in the point on the ground, where the three cosmic levels come into contact. In the mythical view, *hestia*<sup>1</sup> represented communication with the underground world, at the point in the ground, and smoke represented communication with the gods (Vernant 1983: 200–210).

However, the Delphic fire, or *hestia*, was more important than that. As Susan Guettel Cole points out, the fire and water were also symbols of communal life and could be found in the centre of the polis. The *prytaneion* - a physical space in the centre of the city - included one community's common hearth and its sacred fire. The hearth symbolized the community's symbolic centre that connected polis to every other community that partook the same fire. The sacred centre in *polis* was connected with the roads to the sacred centre of each local sanctuary and at the end to Delphi - the centre (Guettel Cole 2004: 76–80). So as we can see, every road led to Delphi. At this point we can argue that the Delphic *hestia* was also the centre of all sacred fires of ancient Greek cities (*polis*) which is derived from the importance of Delphi as the centre. If any fire of any city (*polis*) went out, they came to light it up at Delphi.

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<sup>1</sup> When referring to the fire I write, with the small letter.

## WATER AND PURIFICATION: SACRED SPRINGS CASSOTIS AND CASTALIA

As Arnold van Gennep explained, rituals of the passage include rituals of the separation from the previous world, the transition between worlds and inclusion into the new world. The purification is also counted as *rite de passage* (van Gennep 1960: 18–25).

Mediterranean landscape with its branched water system (rivers that disappeared underground and appeared on the surface somewhere else) inspired the belief that rivers and springs are alive; rivers were presided by male deities and springs by nymphs. All sacred places had to be purified, in order to be congruent with the gods (Guettel Cole 2004: 28–36).

The Delphic landscape is famous for the existence of several springs. The most important for the rituals are Castalia and Cassotis. The spring Castalia was used exclusively for bathing (purifying) of the visitors and Pythia. The purification process at Delphi meant being purified of the earthly impurities, before entering into the sacred area of god Apollo (Guettel Cole 2004: 28–36).

The spring Cassotis was believed to be the part of the subterranean river Styx, which forms the boundary between Earth and the Underworld (Hades). Cassotis emerged as a fountain slightly north from the temple of Apollo, and its waters ran under the adyton through a rocky channel into the chasm, from which the vapors rose. Over that chasm, on a tripod, sat Pythia. She drank from the spring Cassotis and ancient people were convinced (better, they believed) that water from this source gave Pythia the inspiration for prophesying (Kenda 2006: 27).

The connection in the symbolic meaning of the spring Cassotis, as a part of the subterranean rivers Styx and Hades, where the souls of the dead are located, with the Pythias inspiration is clear. It can be argued on the basis of the knowledge that water represented contact with the Underworld, not just in Ancient Greek religion, but also in other ancient religions. As Mirjam Mencej pointed out and later Katja Hrobat Virloget, while referring to their studies of Slavs, the water was a link between worlds and at the same time it was a boundary between worlds. The same case can be found in Ancient Greece, as mentioned above (Mencej 1997: 131–143; Hrobat 2010: 115; Malea 2017: 42).

To conclude the belief, the inspiration for prophesying did not come just from the vapours (Python's breath), but also from the water of the source Cassotis as part of the subterranean river of the dead, therefore from the world of the souls - Hades.

## THE TEMPLE OF APOLLO – ITS PREMEDIATED PLACEMENT AT THE SITE

The Temple of Apollo at Delphi was a doric periptos, including a ramp leading up to a pronaos and further into the naos. The innermost part of the temple, the holy of holies, was known as *adyton* (“inaccessible”) (Ustinova 2009: 142–149).

If I may refer to the previously mentioned Vernant and his finding that the domestic fire/heart/hestia is placed in the middle of the *oikos*, I can also apply this conclusion to the temple of Apollo. Archaeologists have not identified any mentions by ancient authors

(I refer to Herodotus and Plutarch: Hdt. 7.140; Plut. *Mor. De def. or.* 437C) of megaron/oikos, because they were searching for the separate room. Ancient authors mention that the altar of Hestia stood in the middle of the naos and, as Vernant's research has shown, *oikos* winds around the heart. Therefore, we can conclude that naos and oikos/megaron are one and the same room, in the middle of which the altar of Hestia stood (Malea 2017: 45).

The most important part of Delphi was the prophetic chamber (adyton). It was located two metres below the level of the surrounding floor. Only Pythia and priests had access to the adyton, when purified. For other people, regular mortals, access was forbidden in order prevent pollution of the holiest part of the temple (Ustinova 2009: 142–149).

Of interest is the layout of the adyton and temple itself. The adyton was placed over the point where the two chasms crossed. From there, poisonous vapors arose. Under the innermost part, water from the spring Cassotis flowed; in the adyton, also stood the omphalos stone, which marked the centre of the Earth. Therefore, I would argue that the temple was intentionally build on that place for many reasons. According to the belief, the centre of the Earth, the entrance to the Otherworld, the world of souls was there. Thus it was necessary to separate but again to somehow connect the worlds. Consequently, ancient Greeks built the temple's adyton, which was forbidden for regular mortals to enter, precisely over that chasm. The reason I propose is that the entrance to the Otherworld needed to be protected, so that the worlds (the mortal world, the world of souls) would not pollute each other, and mortals would not meet premature death (Cassotis was considered to be a part of the river Styx); on the other side, the communication with both sides would be limited, but still possible, to some extent. Ancient Greeks considered Pythia to be that medium, oracle, who delivered the words of god Apollo and got the inspiration from the Otherworld (Malea 2017: 59).

## CONCLUSION

The communal life and its cultic activities were built around religious beliefs. In this article, I tended to confirm the thesis about the importance of Delphi as the centre of the Ancient Greek religious belief. Around this intertwine different physical and symbolic factors that clearly indicate the importance of this cultic centre.

In this article, I have presented and made conclusions for all main symbols and their meanings that can be found at Delphi. They all indicate the liminal. Python, the snake, as we saw has a dual role. They are symbols of underground power and are associated with Gaia. Python not only indicates the liminal but also its burial. It was believed by Ancient Greeks that the dragon was buried under the omphalos stone that marked the centre of the Earth. Also they believed that the poisonous vapors, which rose from the chasm in adyton, were the breath of the Python, which came from Hades.

Closely associated with the snakes, is water. It was very important for different rites all around Ancient Greece. At Delphi we can find many water sources. The most important two water sources, named Cassotis and Castalia, were used for cultic purposes. The Castalia spring was used for purification, because in Ancient Greece it was necessary to

be cleansed of earthly impurities before entering the sacred area, in order to not pollute the sacred. The water from the spring Cassotis was believed to be the one that gave Pythia inspiration for prophesying. Pythia drank the water from this spring. Ancient Greeks believed that the Cassotis spring was a part of the River Styx, the subterranean river of the souls of the dead. The connection I found was that the spring Cassotis connected the two worlds: the world of the dead, Hades, and the world of the mortals. Thus, according to the belief, Pythia would receive inspiration from the world of the souls as the spring was a part of the Otherworld.

Besides water, fire was also important for communal life. It also indicates the connection between worlds; with the world of the gods by smoke and at the point in the ground with Hades. At Delphi, ancient authors mention the room called “megaron” or “oikos”. In the middle of this room stood hestia/fire. When researching the site, archaeologists did not identify oikos/megaron, because they were searching for a separate room. According to ancient Greek authors’ claims, that the inquirers waited in the megaron and according to Jean-Pierre Vernants’ study of the domestic hearth, I came to conclusion that megaron could be equated with naos of the temple. In the middle of it stood hestia.

The most important and the centre of Delphic fame was a woman named Pythia, the oracle. I analyzed a few different studies, about women in Ancient Greece, while asking myself the question “Why female and why not a male oracle?”. First, I examined the difference between young females and older females, and also in what parts of the rites where they included. I applied some aspects from different studies to the Delphic Pythia, when at first young females were chosen for this role, and later, women in menopause. Menopausal women were chosen, because they had been ritually purified, since they did not menstruate.

The other part of purification was held at the Castalia spring. But why was Pythia a woman serving a male god and why was there no male priest for a male god? All the abovementioned symbols are pointing to something liminal and are gathering around the centre of the Earth, which was believed to be the entrance to the Otherworld or to the womb of the mother Earth. The same as water and snakes, women were also believed to be the connection with the Otherworld, since they bring to life souls, which come from Hades. So, Pythia, who was celibate, as a woman somehow had a “better connection” with the Otherworld.

Therefore, around the centre of the Ancient Greek world, Delphi, which itself meant the entrance to the Otherworld and the connection between worlds, we can find symbols that point out the importance of Delphi and its ritual. Because of the title “Centre of the Earth” and all rituals and landscape symbols, Delphi managed to retain its importance until today.

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## IL SIMBOLISMO GRECO ANTICO NEL PAESAGGIO RELIGIOSO. IL CASO DI DELFI

ANDREA MALEA



La religione nell'antica Grecia era un punto centrale intorno al quale è stata costruita la vita della comunità con le sue attività di culto. Parlando di Delfi, non sono state scritte tante cose sul tema del simbolismo del paesaggio e del suo significato per la comprensione della comunità. Analizzando e confrontando gli studi europei, gli studi sull'antica Grecia ed evidenze archeologiche e storiche, sono riuscita ad addivenire ad alcune conclusioni sul caso di Delfi. Con la sua storia in primo piano, ho tentato di confermare la tesi sull'importanza del sito come centro dell'antica credenza greca in senso religioso. Intorno a questo si intrecciano diversi fattori, fisici e simbolici, che indicano l'importanza di questo centro di culto.

Nell'articolo ho presentato e sono giunta a delle conclusioni riguardanti tutti i simboli e i loro significati che si possono trovare a Delfi, che indicano il suo valore liminale. Queste conclusioni potrebbero essere applicate anche ad altri siti simili, conoscendo i significati principali dei simboli.

Nell'età micenea, Pitone (*Python*) era il serpente o il drago che proteggeva il culto della dea Gea ed aveva un doppio ruolo. I serpenti erano simboli di potenza sotterranea e sono associati a Gea. Gli antichi Greci credevano che il drago fosse sepolto sotto la pietra ònfalo (*omphalos*) che segnava il centro della terra, Gea. Credevano anche che i vapori velenosi, che salivano dalle crepe dell'adyton, fossero il respiro del Pitone, che proveniva dall'Ade.

L'acqua era molto importante per diversi riti anche a Delfi. Qui possiamo trovare due importanti sorgenti d'acqua, chiamati Cassotis e Castalia, usate per scopi di culto. L'acqua della sorgente Castalia veniva utilizzata per la purificazione, perché nell'antica Grecia era necessario purificarsi dalle impurità prima di entrare nell'area sacra, affinché quest'ultima non venisse inquinata. L'acqua della Cassotis era quella che ha dato a Pitia l'ispirazione per la profezia. Credevano che Cassotis facesse parte del fiume sotterraneo delle anime dei morti, Stige. La connessione che ho trovato è che Cassotis collegava i due mondi; il mondo dei morti, l'Ade, con il mondo dei mortali. Quindi, secondo la credenza, Pitia otteneva l'ispirazione dal mondo delle anime poiché Cassotis faceva parte dell'Ade.

Il fuoco era importante anche per la vita della comunità. Esso indicava anche la connessione tra i mondi; il fumo rappresentava la connessione con il mondo degli Dei e il punto in cui la terra incontra l'Ade. Gli autori antichi menzionano a Delfi la unità architettonica chiamata megaron o *oikos*, al centro del quale si trovava l'Estia (*hestia*) / il fuoco. Gli archeologi, durante le ricerche del sito, non hanno individuato la sala perché stavano cercando una stanza separata. Secondo gli autori greci antichi, i quali riportavano che i richiedenti stavano aspettando a megaron, e secondo Jean-Pierre Vernant, che ha fatto degli studi sul tema del cuore

domestico, sono giunta alla conclusione che megaron potrebbe essere identificato come il naos del tempio. Al centro dello stesso si trovava l'Estia, il focolare.

Il baricentro più importante della storia delfica era l'oracolo, una donna chiamata Pitia. Analizzando alcuni studi sulle donne nell'antica Grecia, ho prima esaminato la differenza tra le giovani donne e quelle più anziane, ed in quali parti dei riti vi erano incluse. Così ho applicato alcuni aspetti tratti da diversi studi su Pitia. All'inizio per il ruolo dell'oracolo venivano selezionate giovani donne, invece dopo le donne in menopausa. Considerato che quest'ultime non avevano mestruazioni, venivano ritualmente purificate. L'altra parte della purificazione avveniva alla sorgente Castalia. Tutti questi simboli indicano il valore liminale, e si trovano intorno al centro della terra. Le donne rappresentavano la connessione con l'altro mondo, perché davano vita alle anime provenienti dall'Ade.

Intorno al centro del mondo greco antico, Delfi, che in sé significava l'ingresso all'altro mondo e la connessione tra i mondi, si possono trovare i simboli che indicano l'importanza di Delfi e del suo rito. Grazie al titolo "Centro della Terra" e di tutti i simboli, ha mantenuto la sua importanza fino ad oggi.