In Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris,*¹ the chorus describes how Apollo wrested control of the Delphic Oracle away from Earth. The feat was neither easy nor quick: after Apollo’s initial victory, Earth retaliated by breeding a race of ghosts (*phasmata*), who prophesied by visiting people in their dreams. His dignity impaired, Apollo sought the help of his father, and Zeus struck mute the spectral “voices of night.” Forever after, those who sought prophecies would do so at Delphi under the enlightened patronage of Apollo.

With these words, Euripides offers a ghostly twist on a myth known at least as early as Pindar, whereby Apollo had to battle Earth for his Oracle.² But with that twist Euripides might also have been playing, somewhat ironically, on a familiar characteristic of Delphic oracles in the real world. For Delphic Apollo himself knew a lot about what the ghosts of the dead were up to and frequently conveyed that knowledge to the living, thus serving as mediator between the two realms. Fifty-four of our 519 extant oracular responses from Delphi—10.4%—concern the dead. This exceeds the number of responses concerning colonization—the topic most famously connected with the Delphic Oracle—which comprises 39 oracles, or just 7.5%. Matters of war comprise about 6.5%. Gnomic utterances comprise just over 7%. In fact, no reasonably circumscribed topic comes close to comprising the 10.4% that oracles concerning the dead do.³ Clearly, how the dead were faring and what they were doing were matters of importance to those who made inquiries at Delphi, and Apollo helped them to find out. Why did he take on this role?

¹ Eur. *IT* 1259-82.
³ One that J. Fontenrose dubbed “cult foundations” comprises 78 out of 519 oracles, or 15%, but it is very broad, and overlaps with the category of oracles concerned with the dead, insofar as some oracles advocate founding cults to them (*The Delphic Oracle: its Responses and Operations with a Catalogue of Responses* [Berkeley 1978], 25, etc.).
Answering this question will tell us more, in the long run, not only about Delphic Apollo, but also about one of the important roles that divination plays in a society. But answering it first requires a closer look both at the ways in which the living and the dead interacted in archaic and classical Greece and at the way in which I am using our corpus of extant Delphic oracles. I will begin with the latter topic, and start by clarifying two matters.

My rubric “oracles concerning the dead” can be divided into three types. Most common is the type in which a city or individual is suffering some trouble—plague, famine, infertility or crop failure—and is told by Delphic Apollo that the problem arises from the anger of one or more of the dead. The oracle prescribes rituals through which the anger of the dead can be appeased and the problem, therefore, be solved. Examples are an oracle given to Corax, the murderer of Archilochus, which told him to appease the soul of Archilochus with libations (#1 in my appendix); one given to the Agyllaioi, which told them to propitiate the Phocaean dead to end a plague in their city (#5); and one telling the Spartans to appease Pausanias’ ghost by burying his body and setting up two statues of him in front of Athena’s temple (#8). Twenty-eight out of the 54 oracles concerning the dead (slightly more than 50%) are of this type. A second type calls for establishment of cult to a dead person or persons without any explicit mention of their anger and the problems it causes for the living. For example, an oracle commanded the inhabitants of Metapontum to found a cult to Aristeas after his ghost had appeared there (#31) and another ordered the Delphians to establish cult to Pindar (#35). Seven are of this type. A third type, of which there are 17 examples, comprises oracles that tell a city how they should treat a dead person’s remains. The most famous of these are the oracles instructing the Athenians to retrieve Theseus’ bones (#40) and the Spartans to retrieve Orestes’ bones (#37 and #38). Other examples prohibit mistreatment of the remains or designate their proper burial place; thus one oracle forbids Cleisthenes from casting Adrastus’ remains out of Sicyon (#36) and another tells the Heraklids where to bury Alcmene (#47).

There is overlap amongst my three types. Some of the type 3 oracles either were delivered when a city asked Delphi how they could stop a plague, or included promises that proper treatment of the remains would prevent future city-wide disasters; thus they could just as easily