

Divine and Human Interactions. Talking to Gods at Dodona

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Abstract. *Our main goal here is not to peruse the development of the sanctuary or its relation to the political setting as this would be a topic for further analyses. We intend to present in this article some preliminary observations on the mantic techniques, their use, evolution and the credibility of some sources.*

Rezumat. *Intentia noastra nu a fost aceea de a examina evolutia sanctuarului si relatia sa cu puterea politica, intrucat aceasta reprezinta o tema pe care o vom aborda ulterior. In acest articol intentionam sa prezentam doar cateva observatii preliminare privitoare la tehnicile mantice, utilizarea, evolutia lor si gradul de credibilitate al anumitor surse.*

Keywords: Dodona, oracle, mantic techniques, selloi, peleiades.

Surrounded by a landscape dominated by Mount Tomaros and the long and the narrow valley of the Thyamis, Dodona was situated in Thesprotia, the westernmost and remotest area of Epirus, one of the least touched initially by what we call Greek civilization². It was a mysterious region inhabited by peoples with strange customs even for the Greek themselves³. Its name could come from Apeiros, meaning both mainland and endless land. Two important rivers are located in some proximity in the region: the Acheron river or ‘the River of the Souls’, linked to the Netherworld, where visitors could encounter and establish contacts with their relatives’ souls, and another one, perceived as a fluvial deity, Achelous. The latter is the longest river in Greece, flowing from Epirus and then delimiting the boundary between Akarnania and Aitolia. Despite the fact that he was the only panhellenic god of this kind, he never had a temple of his own dedicated, perhaps because it was considered he inhabited the river⁴. Yet, enquirers were often recommended when consulting the oracle at Dodona to make sacrifices to Achelous.

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² BOSMAN 2018, 67-68: ‘In terms of natural setting, the site impresses by its rural tranquility, in contrast to the drama at Delphi’; NICOL 1958, 128-130; STONEMAN 2011, 55; LONGO et al. 2019, 8; CASTIGLIONI 2016, 113. The latter considers the region as being at the limit of the maritime trade.

³ Some ancient authors like Thukydidies and Strabo perceived them as barbarians. Of the fourteen Epirote tribes, the most prominent were the Chanones, the Molossians and the Thesprotians. The latter were the oldest Greek tribe in the region and the sanctuary was initially under their rule, but from the 5th century on the Molossians took control over the sanctuary. In northern part of the region, Illyrian was the current language, while Greek was spoken mostly in its southern area. For an interesting analysis of their ethnicity see KITTELĂ 2013, 29-35.

⁴ CHAPINAL-HERAS 2021, 111; LONGO et al. 2019, 9.

This could also underline not only the fact that the sanctuary was at the limit between Molossia and Thesprotia, but also that 'Epirus too was considered a liminal region, between Greeks and barbarians. A sacrifice to Achelous, the most important river in the Hellenic world, would remind pilgrims of the Hellenicity of the population and the territory'⁵.

Most of the testimonies related to Dodona and its mantic sessions have indeed an intriguingly puzzling character, as numerous researchers underlined. Besides, archaeology proved that one of the methods of consultation never mentioned in the literary sources in Antiquity is actually very well attested at Dodona, i.e. enquiries by the use of lead lamellae⁶.

Ancient texts and inscriptions indicate that the tutelary deity at Dodona was Zeus, a divinity whose cult was very popular in Epirus and is therefore well attested in the region. His common name here is Zeus Naios, an epithet that could be interpreted and translated very differently according to different etymologies and could mean either 'god of ships' or 'god of the temple' or more precisely 'the god who dwells'⁷. Only once the form Zeus Pronaios occurs together with Diona on a lamella datable either at the end of the rule of Artaxerxes II Mnemon or at the time of the revolt against Artaxerxes III in 355-354 BC, where Porinos, son of Evandros, from Kyme asks the gods whether it would be good to put himself in the service of the satrap and governor⁸.

Scholars have pinpointed not only the fact that Dione, considered wife of Zeus in Dodona, was the second most important deity of the sanctuary, but also the fact that this chthonic goddess might have been the original inhabitant of the place⁹. She appears on a remarkable number of oracular consultations was given, together with her daughter Aphrodite, most of the dove objects dedicated to the sanctuary, as a sort of 'dove goddess'. It is worth noticing that several myths here most probably connected Dione, the doves, and the peleiades¹⁰. The approximately 4,000 texts preserved indicate that Zeus Naios and Dione were most often consulted, but other divinities preserving oracular functions, such as Apollo and Themis, were also enquired¹¹.

⁵ CHAPINAL-HERAS 2021, 111-112.

⁶ There are also some very interesting stories related to the beginnings of archaeological research here in 1875/6 and the disputes between Karapanos and Mineyko. See KATSIKOUUDIS 2013, 307-309; MANOULOPOULOS 2015, 597-613 and GREIFENHAGEN 1981, 5-10.

⁷ KATSADIMA (2019, 131) shows that the adjectives *phagonaios* and *naios* connects the sacred tree with Zeus as it was this deity who dwelt at the roots of the sacred oak. *Dodonaios*, was also currently in use. RACHET 1962, 90; LHÔTE 2006, 8-15; VECCHIO 2019, 41 and 45-46; QUANTIN 2008, 29-33; CHAPINAL-HERAS 2021, 105.

⁸ DVC 35A+37B; LHÔTE 2017, 43-44 (dated here cca 360-358 BC). This form is considered by Lhôte and the previous publishers an error due to the fact that Porinos wrote the question himself on the tablet made the confusion with Athena Pronaia from Delphi. https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2020/12/ciod_dvc_35a37b.

⁹ BOSMAN 2018, 68 and 70-71; QUANTIN (2008, 41) curiously believed that this divine couple was not formed in Dodona and that their cult must have been introduced there at the beginning of the 5th century BC.

¹⁰ CHAPINAL-HERAS 2021, 107-109.

¹¹ TSELIKAS 2017, 34-35; CHAPINAL-HERAS 2021, 109-111. As Tselikas notes, only 10% of them are completely preserved.

The foundation myths indicate that Deukalion and Pyrrha, the only people that survived the Great Flood came here first, even if Delphi claimed that their boat halted on the ground on Mount Parnassus. Despite that, Herodotos (2, 52) was convinced that Dodona was the oldest oracle of its kind in Greece¹². Dodona was perceived sometimes as the greatest competitor of Delphi¹³. Yet, the truly panhellenic character of the sanctuary is contested for the time before the period of reconstruction and enhancement of architectural features during Pyrrhos' time¹⁴. Indeed, even if rhetorically and mythically Dodona and Delphi were placed at the same level, the archaeological and epigraphic data indicate there were very few official enquiries at Dodona and that it was frequented most often by the neighbours, i.e. people from the surrounding areas of northern Greece, Corcyra and Magna Graecia¹⁵. There is a strong presence of various dialects in these inscriptions which date from the 6th century BC to the Roman conquest of Epirus in 167 BC. The greatest concentration of epigraphs are situated in the 5th and 4th centuries¹⁶.

The sources indicate the presence of two colleges or groups among the sacred personnel of the shrine: the selloi or helloi (also called tomouroi¹⁷) and the peleïades (or 'doves'). The earliest mentioned interpreters are the selloi, whose existence, at least in the later phases of the sanctuary' existence is sometimes contested¹⁸. In the Iliad (16, 233-5), their habits seem rather odd: 'Zeus, lord, Dodonaean, Pelasgian, who dwell afar, ruling over wintry Dodona – and about you live the Selli, your interpreters, men with unwashed feet who sleep on the ground'. Subsequently, Hesiod calls the neighbouring area Hellopia, i.e. the land of the Helloi¹⁹. Van Windekens suggested that the term employed by Herodotos, ἀνιπτόποδες, meaning in reality not only 'with unwashed feet' but 'barefooted' should be closely connected to the idea of their sleeping on the ground (χαμαιεῦναι) and Δωδώνη, all belonging to the same semantic field that underline the connection with the ground and earth, and that 'For the Dodonean priests the physical contact with the earth was not a pollution but a holy necessity'²⁰.

Later on, sources mention the presence of a second group of priestesses called the peleïades or 'the doves'. Some ancient authors describe the tasks of each group, reminding them altogether. Chapinal-Heras suggests that 'the absence of the peleïades in the Homeric poems, where only the selloi appear, does not by itself mean that there were no priestesses at all in the Archaic period' and then that 'both groups coexisted for centuries, until the selloi lost

¹² Also Strabo, 7, 7, 10.

¹³ JOHNSTON 2008, 60; PARKE, 1967, 3.

¹⁴ DILLON 2017, 324; CHAPINAL-HERAS 2021, 113.

¹⁵ DILLON 2017, 327.

¹⁶ CHAPINAL-HERAS 2021, 117.

¹⁷ RACHET 1962, 91-92; VECCHIO 2019, 46-49.

¹⁸ JOHNSTON 2008, 63.

¹⁹ See also JOHNSTON 2008, 63.

²⁰ VAN WINDEKENS 1961, 91-92.

prominence due to the decrease in Dodona's importance"²¹. Herodotos (2, 55-57) might have tried to rationalize the two stories concerning the black doves at Dodona and the oracle of Zeus Ammon in Lybia²². First, he recalls the two Egyptian priestesses kidnapped by the Phoenicians, one taken to Lybia and the other to Dodona. Then, he reaches to a different version told by a priestess of Dodona. She said that there had been be two black doves that flew from Egypt to Dodona and she called them 'black' because the Egyptians were dark-skinned. The dove that settled in Dodona set her residence in a sacred oak tree and began to prophesize in human voice, the first delivered message being that an oracular site should be established there²³. Thus, the many voiced ancestral oak tree in Dodona is connected both to the activity of the selloi and the peleides for many generations and resisted until the AD 391, when it was cut down by an Illyrian bandit who wished to put an end to the temple activity²⁴.

In his *Phaidros* (244b), Plato provides an impressive picture over the nature of prophetic state of these human doves while involved in the mantic sessions: 'The prophetess of Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona are out of their minds (i.e. *manesai*) when they perform that fine work of theirs for all of Greece, either for an individual person or for a whole city, but they accomplish little or nothing when they are in control of themselves' and then continues his exposition 'But here's some evidence worth adding to our case: The people who designed our language in the old days never thought of madness as something to be ashamed of or worthy of blame; otherwise they would not have used the word "manic" for the finest experts of all – the ones who tell the future – thereby weaving insanity into prophecy. They thought it was wonderful when it came as a gift of the god, and that's why they gave its name to prophecy; but nowadays people don't know the fine points, so they stick in a "t" and call it "mantic"'. This passage clearly indicates the fact that the priestesses at Dodona, just like the Pythiai at Delphi acquired a certain state of enthousiasmos or a trance before ever prophesy and that this state of divine possession of their body was certainly different from their normal condition.

Therefore, two different methods of divination could have been in use simultaneously in a separate way by different 'specialized' groups. In other words, the sacred oak tree could have been used both by the selloi and by the peleides by employing a certain peculiar type of dendromancy and the interpretation of movements and 'chattering of the birds', i.e. the doves.

Besides, archaeological evidence shows that inside the area of the *temenos* a series of cauldrons were set on tripods, like a circle of cauldrons around the sacred oak. Chapinal-Heras states that it is possible to distinguish different phases in the use of the oracle: initially it was

²¹ CHAPINAL-HERAS 2021, 104.

²² NESSELRATH 1999, 3.

²³ JOHNSTON 2008, 63-64; PÖTSCHER 1966, 116-121.

²⁴ DILLON 2017, 326; CHAPINAL-HERAS 2021, 120. Previously, the sacred tree risked twice to be cut, first by the woodcutter Hellos and then by the young shepherd Mardylas. Yet the troops of the Aitolian general Dorimachos, who took an active part during the Social War, even if plundered and set fire to the sanctuary, they did not do so with the temple. See KATSADIMA 2019, 132-133 for the interpretation of sources.

the tree itself that was used in the mantic sessions, even if he insists on the probability ‘that the sacred tree was merely symbolic’. Then the cauldrons began to appear in the 8th and 7th centuries, followed a century later by the lead lamellae. He also implies that as soon as the temenos wall was build, the circle of cauldrons ‘was no longer necessary’, being replaced by a ‘mechanism’, i.e. the Kerkyrean present²⁵. The mechanism or automaton that was supposed in his opinion to replace the use of the cauldrons was in fact a bronze statue offered as a gift (*anathema*), representing a young man or a boy, holding a whip, probably with bones at the end of its three chains (or leather thongs, according to Dillon), a fragment of Zenobius (6, 5) providing a description of this statue of the boy and the cauldron as standing atop two columns. When the wind blew, these bones struck the cauldron and produced sounds and noises now and then to be later interpreted as god’s speech²⁶. Dillon even underlines the fact that the lasting sound was so prolong that ‘one could count to 400’²⁷.

Of course, there are indications in later sources about the use of water and hallucinogenic vapours inside the sacred precinct at Dodona that are to be treated very cautiously. Servius, in his comments on Aeneid (3, 466) stated that a spring used to flow under the roots of the sacred oak and that the water produced a sound like a murmur to be interpreted by a woman named Pelias. Both him and Pliny in his *Natural History* (2, 228) also affirmed that this source of water used for the torches to be extinguished and then reignited. As for Prudentius, he records the presence of some hallucinogenic vapours at Dodona, but his testimony is so exceptional that he probably mistook Dodona for Delphi²⁸.

As for the presence of the lead or bronze tablets, it is surprising that none of the ancient literary sources mention their existence. A small fraction of 150 lamellae were published by Éric Lhôte in 2006, followed in 2013 by the comprising publication, in two volumes, of the oracular tablets from the excavations of Evangelidis²⁹. One of the mantic procedures involved here perhaps the use of binary system with yes or no answers, just like a usual lot system. There are indications that at least some of these tablets were melted down and then reused³⁰. The cleromantic procedure in this case was supposed to be simple: on one face of the tablet the question addressed by the enquirer was written down, stating the type of problem and whether it was suitable to perform one sort of action or another, then the tablet was folded and was given to the interpreter who draw a lot from a jar (that could be a bean or a pebble with a different colour) and who stated the answer to be noted on the back of the tablet³¹. Yet, there

²⁵ CHAPINAL-HERAS 2021, 119; CHAPINAL 2015, 29-30.

²⁶ JOHNSTON 2008, 66; CHAPINAL 2015, 26; CHAPINAL-HERAS 2021, 116.

²⁷ DILLON 2017, 330.

²⁸ JOHNSTON 2008, 65-66; CHAPINAL-HERAS 2021, 116. SCOTT LITTLETON (1986, 84-85) was convinced of this possibility at Dodona.

²⁹ TSELIKAS 2017, 34-5. See also SOUEREF 2017, 21.

³⁰ CHAPINAL-HERAS 2021, 117-118.

³¹ DILLON 2017, 330; JOHNSTON 2008, 68-71.

are instances when a potential discouraged enquirer might have asked the divinity for a second time, not being satisfied with the first answer given by the oracle³². Some other tablets lead to serious problems of interpretation regarding the procedure involved to answer to two or multiple questions addressed at the same time by a specific enquirer³³. But this is a very peculiar topic that needs to be addressed separately.

Is it possible to fit all these elements together? In our opinion, the situation is to be compared to other oracular centres as well. It is very likely that at first a certain mantic technique to be in use and as the time went on, other procedures to be added without thoroughly replacing the previous ones (for example at Delphi the use of hallucinogenic vapours as well as lot oracles or at Claros the employment of similar trance technique, but also the astragals). These elements (chattering of doves, twitter of leaves, sounds of cauldrons or murmur of the spring) could just represent only what Johnston defines as trigger³⁴ external factor that only induced the state of divine possession. There is therefore no reason to believe that at a certain point a certain mantic technique just replaced another one fallen into disuse. The sources do not indicate a successive replacement in mantic activities, so we can conclude that at certain period some of these techniques would acquire more prominence than others, which were not totally neglected.

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³² DVC 279B; TSELIKAS 2017, 38.

³³ DVC 194A and DVC 195B; DVC 2367; TSELIKAS 2017, 36-38.

Also https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/ciod_dvc_2367 with the following translation: 'Dieu. Bonne fortune. Épilytos demande à Zeus Naios et à Diona ce qu'il pourrait faire et à quel dieu il pourrait sacrifier pour être heureux; s'il doit exercer le métier qu'il a appris, ou s'il doit se lancer dans une autre affaire; s'il gagnera de l'argent dans cette entreprise; si c'est Phainoména qu'il doit prendre pour femme, ou une autre; enfin, s'il doit se marier tout de suite ou attendre'.

³⁴ JOHNSTON 2008, 71-72.

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