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Between the Oak and the Doves: Changes in the Sanctuary of Dodona Over the Centuries

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Abstract

This paper aims to show the kind of changes which the sanctuary of Dodona experienced over the centuries. Changes in the cults, in the people involved there and in the form of the sacred space. This can be seen in its cults, the people that have worked there and its development as a sacred space. Dodona is a good example of a multifunctional place; over time the site has not only been used for cultic practices, but politics and sports. In this respect, also economic aspects must be considered. An interdisciplinary approach, considering literature, epigraphy and archaeology (including landscape archaeology) is used to track these changes.

Keywords

Dodona, Sanctuaries, Greece, Change, Policultural

1. Introduction, aims and methodology¹

Change is a constant. Religion has been analyzed sometimes as static, trying to show a fixed image, as if variations and alterations never happened. Religion is usually linked to conservatism. Rites and customs are regarded as very ancient, seeming not to have changed since their origin. Nevertheless any in-depth analysis that covers all the aspects of a religion's development can demonstrate how modifications are introduced, how religion is something dynamic. These alterations can be unconscious, but there are normally one or more causes that motivated them.² It is possible to see this in all the historical periods, including our current age.³

There were several moments in Ancient Greece that constituted a meaningful shift in the development of Hellenic culture. Of paramount importance is the transition from the

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² Brandt 2012, p. 146.

³ Chaniotis 2011, p. 10.

Classical Age to the Hellenistic, as is noted in this article. This change entailed a breakdown of some of the main characteristics of Greek culture compared to previous centuries, particularly in terms of the adaptation of religion. The term ‘adaptation’ is indeed accurate, changes do not create totally new situations, instead there is a previous legacy. Hobsbawm summarizes this in the correct way: ‘Adaptation took place for old uses in new conditions and by using old models for new purposes’.⁴ The Hellenistic Age in particular, saw substantial change; in fact, each region and polis had its own changes.⁵ The creation of new subdivisions in a polis entailed cultic modifications.⁶ Obviously, it is possible to discern stable patterns and structures, but they are not eternal. We must not overlook alterations in religion, especially when ‘new traditions’ are created and are portrayed as ancient.⁷

In line with the rest of the articles of this volume, this study focuses on the cultic evolution of a place, in this case the sanctuary of Dodona, located in Epirus, Greece. The research will be divided into two parts. On the one hand, the evolution and transformation of Dodona as a religious centre, with an emphasis on the way the oracle worked. On the other, the development of this sanctuary and its gradual trend to become multifunctional, especially during the Hellenistic Age.

In order to do this it is essential to consider a broad, interdisciplinary range of sources, such as literature, epigraphy and archaeology. Furthermore, the branch of landscape archaeology provides a very useful framework that allows us to analyze sacred space as something consciously modified. Unfortunately, even with the available data, a complete reconstruction is not possible. This is the problem of Dodona, where sources provide little information and can be contradictory. Hence it is necessary to critically analyze each fragment, and where possible, to consider the authenticity and objectivity of each author. Furthermore, the archaeological evidence is not organized or published systematically. Our analysis emphasizes processes instead of static approaches, by taking into account the continuous movement of politics, culture, economics and religion. Thus the available sources used in this article are treated as samples from the different phases of cults and functions of Dodona, and also as products of this dynamic development.

The sanctuary of Dodona, located in Epirus, in the Northwest of Hellas, functioned for many centuries, maybe since the Bronze Age,⁸ until its abandonment in Late Antiquity,

⁴ Hobsbawm 1983, p. 5.

⁵ Chaniotis 2013, pp. 24-25. In his study, Chaniotis 2013, p. 27, contributes several good examples. One of them is an epigraph from Antiochia (*LSAM* 81), where it is decreed how a procession is going to be from that time onwards. Here some new elements are introduced. Another important change process was the Roman conquest of Hellas that also had its reflection in the religious sphere. In this sense an interesting study is that of Graf 2011.

⁶ Sourvinou-Inwood 1990, p. 310.

⁷ Hobsbawm 1983.

⁸ Foss 1978, p. 127. In fact, Greek people considered Dodona to be the oldest oracle (*Hdt.*, 2, 52, 2).

coinciding with the coming of the Slavic people.⁹ Its dynamism can be seen in different ways, for instance in the evolution of sacred space, the variations of the way the oracular consultation worked, or the construction of administrative buildings near the cultic area. Several publications have focused on Dodona. They have analyzed the evidence with regard to its cults¹⁰ and the way the oracle functioned.¹¹ However, the role of Dodona as a multifunctional place is less well researched.

2. Development and cultic changes

Sanctuaries do not persist unchanged over centuries. New cults are introduced, and those that already exist suffer modifications. In essence rites change due to the fact that society itself changes.¹² As time goes by the original meaning of a ritual practice, its symbology is usually lost and it acquires new connotations. Some of these elements can be altered because of new necessities and tendencies, for example to highlight a specific political power.¹³

2.1. Zeus and Dione

The main cult in Dodona revolved around the god of Olympus, Zeus, who was notorious across Epirus.¹⁴ A common epithet there was *Naios*, a difficult term whose interpretation has been debated for over a century.¹⁵

It seems that cultic variations in Dodona began even when the place was born. There is no information that allows us to confirm that Zeus was venerated before the 8th century,

⁹ Chrysos 1997, p. 155.

¹⁰ Mainly Hammond 1967; Parke 1967; Dakaris 1973; Dieterle 2007; Piccinini 2012.

¹¹ Especially Cook 1902; Nicol 1958; Rachet 1962; Mylonopoulos 2006; Tzouvara-Souli 2007.

¹² Chaniotis 2002, p. 43.

¹³ Stravrianopoulou 2011, p. 91.

¹⁴ A good synthesis of the Epirote centres in which this divinity was relevant was written by Tzouvara-Souli 2004.

¹⁵ One of the first researches focused on this topic was made by Cook 1903 [in the references is 1902]. He underscored the difficulty of this question: it can be understood as *ναῦς* ('god of boats'), *ναός* ('god of the temple'), or *ναίω* ('god who dwells'). If we take into consideration the context of Dodona (on the mainland, far away from the coast, and without important streaming), it is logical to think that the epithet would be connected to the last two possibilities. In Hammond 1967, p. 39, n. 2, neither of the two is right, given to the fact that the cult of this deity seems to have been linked to natural elements. He suggested that it could be Zeus as a god to a sacred spring, probably because there was one near to the shrine, or maybe because of the underground streams. More recently, Lhôte 2006, pp. 407-420, defends that 'god who dwells' sounds better and links it to the chthonic cult. The key is that this meaning fits well with the works of Homer and Hesiod. In this case, ancient sources are recommended, better than later authors who could have alter the meaning. So Lhôte probably proceeds the right way.

although it is not possible to deny it firmly. It is thought that there was a female chthonic cult during the previous centuries,¹⁶ linked to fertility, and maybe it began in 2600-1900 or 1900-1600 BC.¹⁷

There is no specific information about whether there was a prior cult or what the causes of change were. It can be assumed that the cult of Zeus became the main one from the 8th century onwards, as the votive offerings show. In fact, it seems that the introduction of this god is linked to Northern cultures.¹⁸ Among these objects, it is worth pointing out those warriors that hold a projectile and a shield; probably they represent the god.¹⁹ In this sense the most popular figurines are those of Zeus Keraunios, made with bronze, that appear in the shrine in 530 BC.²⁰



Fig. 1. Figure of Zeus Ceraunios from Dodona. Berlin, Altes Museum. Photo of the Author.

Apart from archaeological materials, literature and epigraphy are very useful sources. On the one hand, in Homeric poems Zeus is mentioned as the tutelary god of Dodona.²¹ On the other, epigraphy is paramount. Pilgrims wrote questions to the oracle on lead tablets.

¹⁶ Farnell 1977, pp. 7-8.

¹⁷ Dakaris 2003, p. 7.

¹⁸ Simon 1980, p. 16.

¹⁹ Parke 1967, p. 39; Dieterle 2007, p. 181.

²⁰ Tzouvara-Souli 2004, p. 520.

²¹ Hom., *Il.* 16, 233-235; *Od.* 14, 310-337 and 19, pp. 268-299.

Some years ago Lhôte offered a high-quality study of them, and more recently Dakaris *et alii* have presented a corpus of 4216 epigraphs, although there are still many unpublished.²²

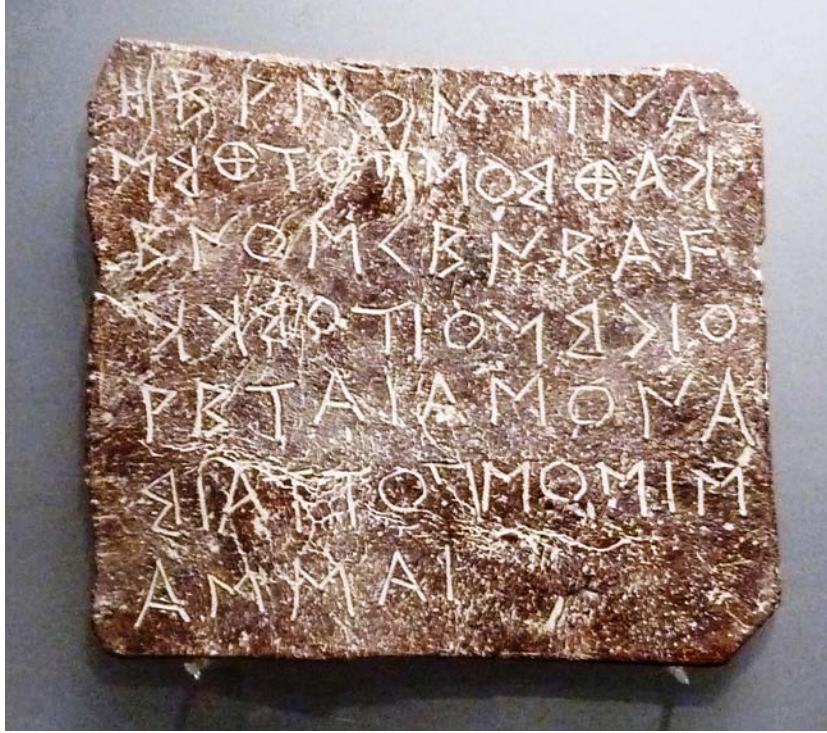


Fig. 2. Oracular tablet from Dodona. Archaeological Museum of Dodona. Photo of the Author.

Fortunately many of these pieces are still preserved; the oldest ones are dated as 6th century BC.²³ ‘Zeus Naios’ can be read in a tablet with text on both sides; one side is dated from the beginning of the second half of the 5th century; as ‘Zε<υ> / Ναίε appears in the other text,²⁴ it can be suggested that it has a similar (not exact) age.

²² Lhôte 2006 and Dakaris *et alii* 2013.

²³ Lhôte 2006, p. 11, who adds that only a few epigraphs can be dated with exactitude, N° 41 and 77. In the new corpus of Dakaris *et alii*: N° 3, 157B, 158B, 411A, 412A, 413B, 414B, 415A, 416B, 1042A, 1978A, 1993A, 1996B, 2158B, 2368A, 2371B, 2381A, 2382B, 2660A, 2662B, 3549A, 3619A, 3621A, 3828A, 3829A, 3830A and 4150A. Among these, only N° 3549A seems to have been written in the first half of the 6th century.

²⁴ Lhôte 2006, N° 133. Even though the former piece in which is written Zeus *Naios* can be safely dated from the 4th century, according to Lhôte 2006, pp. 407-412. Additionally, in epigraph N° 95 (ca. 400-390), it is read Zeus, without any epithet.

The supposed ancient chthonic cult was adapted to the change, persisting as a different cult with a minor role:²⁵ Dione, partner of Zeus in Dodona, both parents of Aphrodite.²⁶ It is difficult to explain why Zeus became the main god of the sanctuary. Some scholars have linked it to Greek colonization of the Epirote shores. It has been supposed that initially Eleans were the first who founded *apoikiai* in the 8th and 7th centuries, concretely Boucheta, Pandosia and Elateia.²⁷ As in Elis the main sanctuary was Olympia with Zeus as tutelary god, it has been conventionally linked to the appearance of Zeus in Dodona. However in a recent publication Prof. Domínguez Monedero maintains that there is no archaeological evidence that there was Elean colonization.²⁸ His strong arguments lead us to think that there was no connection between an Elean presence in Epirus and the beginning of the cult of Zeus in Dodona. However, we should keep in mind that not all of the archaeological materials found in these sites have been published yet. Therefore, the above question concerning the origin of Zeus Naïos in Dodona is still open.

2.2. The *Selloi* and the *Peleiades*

The sole information we have about the people who worked at the shrine comes from literature sources. However these testimonies, instead of helping us to reconstruct a clear theme, speak of two different groups, the *Selloi* and the *Peleiades*, generating confusion when we try to analyze whether they were contemporary or the former were replaced by the latter.

It seems that the *Selloi* (Σελλοί)²⁹ were the oldest group. At least, they appear in the Homeric poems, where their customs are underscored: they did not wash their feet and used to lay on the ground, so they could stay in constant contact with Mother Earth.³⁰ At

²⁵ Parke 1967, p. 70.

²⁶ Hom., *Il.* 5, 370-372. The cult to Dione seems to have existed already in Mycenaean Age. Lévêque 1997, p. 155, identifies it with *di-wi-ja*, the female form of *di-ne*, that is to say, Zeus. The name of Dione derives from this deity. It has also been interpreted as 'the dove goddess' mentioned on the tablet Tn 316 from Pylos: *pe-re-*82 = Peleia*. This is the reasoning of Aravantinos, Godart, Sacconi 1995, p. 838, who analyze the document, as well as another more recent one in which it can be read *pe-re-wi-jo*, that is to say, 'priest of the dove goddess'. This question will be dealt with later.

²⁷ Theopomp.Hist., *FGrHist* 115 F206 (228). Dakaris 1971, p. 33; Hammond 1982, p. 270.

²⁸ Domínguez Monedero 2015.

²⁹ Parke 1967, p. 7, talks about the use of '*helo?*' instead of '*Sello?*'. Corvisier 1991, pp. 108-111, interprets that the *Selloi* were not the staff of the shrine, but the entire population of Dodona and its surroundings; he thinks that they were not Greek. This theory is based on some passages, especially Aristotle: 'There lived the *Selloi* and those who in that time were called "Greeks" and now "Hellenes"' (*Met.* 352a, own translation). Strabo (7, 7, 11) talks about the male staff as *tomourí*, a name derived from the mount Tomarus, located near Dodona.

³⁰ Cook 1925, p. 960. Marsá 2007, p. 266, relates this with Dodona, while Quantin 1999, p. 74, underscores that these customs were not uncommon in the pastoral way of living, precisely the economic activity of a great part of the Epirote population.

some point a female cult charge was created; the priestesses were named *Peleiades* (Πέλειαι or Πελειάδες, a word also commonly used for doves).³¹

In order to understand the process by which the staff of Dodona changed, it is necessary to analyze all the fragments and put them into context.

Herodotus does not speak about the *Selloi*. Because of this, it is possible to think that when the geographer lived, these priests no longer existed, or that their prestige in Dodona had fallen.³² There are two other important passages. Firstly, Pindar (518-438 BC) probably dedicated four paeans to Dodona. In one, that has remained in a fragmentary condition, the author mentions the Ἑλλῶν, that is to say, '(S)Ello?'.³³ The lyric poet very probably was proxenos of the Molossian royal court, which at that time controlled Dodona.³⁴ This implies that he had a complete knowledge of the place. Secondly, in 350 BC, Demosthenes, in his discourse Against Midias, quoted a number of oracles in support of his arguments. In one of them he says: 'To the people of the Athenians the prophet of Zeus announces...'.³⁵ Therefore, he alludes to a priest. Taking into consideration that the orator speaks to the audience about a real and recent oracle, I consider that it is a strong argument to confirm that when Demosthenes lived there were still the *Selloi*.

The other works in which the *Selloi* are named are less reliable. Some of them speak about priests that describe the ancient provenance of the oracle and how they are mentioned in Homer.³⁶

Strabo offers an interesting datum when he explains that originally the *Selloi* prophesized, but that at some point the cult of Dione became fixed and associated with the cult of Zeus; then, it was ordered that three old women had to be in charge of this work.³⁷ But this passage of Strabo can be problematic because there are different versions in his book. For example, in one of them he explains that the flight of three doves would allow priestesses to prophesy; he does not talk about the *Selloi*.³⁸ Pausanias, on the other hand, attributes a great antiquity to

³¹ A term that, in opinion of Herodotus (2, 57), received because of their barbarian condition and due to the fact that they emitted sounds that were quite similar to the birds'.

³² Parke 1967, p. 55.

³³ Pi., P. Fr. 59.

³⁴ Pi., P. Fr. 57-60. With regard to this, see Hornblower 2004, pp. 178-181; Kittelä 2013, p. 39.

³⁵ D., *Mid.* 53 (trans. by A.T. Murray).

³⁶ Kineas, *FGrHis* 603 F 2 (IV-III century BC.), when he calls 'pelasgian' to the *Selloi*. Alex.Aph., *In Mete.* 352; Call., *Del.* 277-287.

³⁷ Str. 7, 7, 9. It is alluded again in a similar way in Str., Fr. 7, 1b. Apart from this, we have to stop in the fact that peleiades are described as old women. Strabo adds in Fr. 7, 1a and 2, that among Thesprotian and Molossian people, who dwelled that region, old women were called *peleiai* and old men *peleioi*. This implies that the term was closely linked to that age fringe, so it is probable that priestesses of Dodona had always been old. In this sense, Vilatte 1991, p. 230 explains a theory that connects the Indo-European root **-pel*, that may mean 'grey', with the hair colour of the peleiades.

³⁸ Str., Fr. 7, 1.

this female figure.³⁹ Both authors lived in a later period, although Strabo cites many of his sources, as for instance when he alludes that Suidas explained a peculiar theory about the origin of Dodona in Thessaly: the shrine would have been moved with some women to Epirus; the priestesses would descend from those women.⁴⁰

These *Peleiades* appear alone (without the presence of the *Selloi*) only in a few passages. The oldest one is Herodotus, who relates the mythical foundation of the oracle, linking it to that of Amun in Thebes.⁴¹ Some references date from later periods, as for instance a discourse of Aelius Aristides (2nd century AD) and Pausanias (same century) who claims that the role of the priestesses is ancient.⁴² However, Ephorus, who lived in the Classical Period (400/380-330 BC.) offers an interesting reference. He narrates the assassination of a prophetess. This entailed the creation of a popular tradition in which a tripod was carried annually from Boeotia to Dodona.⁴³ It is worth pointing out that in this fragment it is said that some men were in charge of the oracular consultations of Boeotian people, although the author does not specify if they were the *Selloi*.

There are some passages, just a few, in which both the *Peleiades* and the *Selloi* appear. The main one comes from Philostratus (2nd-3rd AC), who describes how the staff of the sanctuary was organized. In these lines, priests and priestess were coetaneous.⁴⁴ It is also meaningful that Sophocles, in his *Trachiniae* (written between 464 and 410, probably in the middle of the 5th century) alludes to the *Peleiades*,⁴⁵ and later to the *Selloi*, describing their peculiar customs.⁴⁶

Having reached this point, it is necessary to bring all the evidence together, in order to arrive at a conclusion. It seems logical to think that originally there were only the *Selloi* and then later a female group was added, the *Peleiades*.⁴⁷ At the time of Herodotus the *Peleiades* already existed, indeed the author claims they were ancient. This means that the *Peleiades* maybe appeared some time before this author. On the other hand, Homer only mentions the *Selloi*. Between the two works there are two or three centuries, more if we take into consideration that some elements of Homeric poems can be dated earlier, even as far back as the Mycenaean Age. At some point during this long period, it is likely that the *Peleiades* were introduced.

³⁹ Paus., 10, 12, 10.

⁴⁰ Str., 7, 7, 12.

⁴¹ Hdt., 2, 54-57.

⁴² Aristid., *Serapis*, 7.

⁴³ Ephor., *FGrHis* 70 F119 (cf. Str., 9, 2, 4).

⁴⁴ Philost., *Im.* 2, 33.

⁴⁵ Soph., *Tr.* 171, who reports the exact number of priestesses as two, although in other versions they are mentioned as three.

⁴⁶ Soph., *Tr.* 1164-1172.

⁴⁷ Racht 1962, p. 88.

However, does the appearance of the female group entail the disappearance of the male one? F. Quantin thinks that it is not necessarily a replacement.⁴⁸ In fact, if we consider Pindar and Demosthenes as reliable sources, the *Selloi* were active until at least the middle of the 4th century BC.

Therefore, it appears that originally there were only priests, but during the Archaic Period the female group was introduced. The main reason could be a rise in the number of pilgrims. As we can verify with archaeological, epigraphic and literary evidence, the number of pilgrims from Hellas and Greek colonies rose considerably during this period. The need for better management of the different activities of the sanctuary would have required the introduction of new staff. However, it is difficult to explain why they decided to create a group of priestesses, instead of just employing more men.

Unfortunately it is not possible to answer with certainty whether both the *Selloi* and the *Peleiades* worked at the same time in Dodona. The answer probably is affirmative, but there is no way to conclude it with solid arguments. Some later authors speak about them, together or separately; but they usually just describe their peculiarities, as for instance the customs of the priests. Thus the *Selloi* may have disappeared before, but could have persisted in memory as literary figures, leaving the *Peleiades* as the only staff during the later centuries of activity of the sanctuary of Zeus Naios.

2.3. The functioning of the oracle

Occasionally it is difficult to analyze the way per se an oracle worked and the way it was consulted. Dodona is a good example. Sources show us different mechanisms. It is necessary to rebuild the process, and examine the changes that took place.

An oak ($\delta\rho\upsilon\varsigma$)⁴⁹ was the main element of the shrine. It was connected to Zeus Naios, as an instrument of the god for his prophecies.⁵⁰ It was surrounded by bronze cauldrons with tripods. The second characteristic icon of Dodona was the dove and important element in some literature references.⁵¹ The name of the priestesses, Πελειάδες, is that of the bird, indeed.

It is worth pointing out that literary testimonies offer several descriptions that do not coincide. Another reliable source is epigraphy which provides us with information about a different method that does not appear in the literature. Archaeological remains also give us some evidence, although it is not enough to get a clear picture of the question.

⁴⁸ Quantin 1999, p. 74. Kowalzig 2007, p. 347, separates both groups, indicating that the myth refers to male priests, but that historical data only mention the priestesses. Therefore he concludes that possibly the *peleiades* replaced the *Selloi*. However, this theory does not take into account Pindar and Demosthenes.

⁴⁹ Dakaris 1973, p. 158, informs us that it is specifically a *Quercus aegilops*, autochthonous from Greece, small in size.

⁵⁰ Parke 1967, p. 26 ff; Lévêque 1997, p. 198.

⁵¹ Mainly Hdt., 2, 54-57.

Ancient references can be divided into four themes, apart from the already mentioned *Selloi* and *Peleiades*: the oak, the doves, the bronze cauldrons and others.

The magical character of the oak in Dodona is a recurring aspect in several works, usually because it spoke, that is to say, because Zeus spoke through it.⁵² The role of doves in oracular activity can be related to divination through the flight of birds, something observed in many places and cultures. So do some ancient authors.⁵³

Archaeological testimonies fit well with bronze cauldrons, a third possibility. There are several passages in which a cauldron is said to ‘speak’ when it is hit, producing a sound.⁵⁴ Originally some cauldrons with tripods surrounded the oak.⁵⁵ The oldest pieces are dated on the 8th century.⁵⁶ Later they were replaced by a wall erected in the first half of the 4th century BC,⁵⁷ and rebuilt twice.⁵⁸ Cauldrons seem to have lost part of their prominence, although it was likely the moment when a present made by the Korkyrean people was introduced in the consultation procedure.⁵⁹ It consisted of a statue of a man holding a bronze whip with bones at the end of its three chains; these would punch the cauldron, producing a noise that could be interpreted as the words of a god.⁶⁰

There are other theories that add a new element to the Dodonaean landscape. It is usually a fountain or spring that had the ability of putting the fire of torches out and of lighting those that were out;⁶¹ but none of these fragments indicate that it functioned as an oracle. The employment of hallucinogenic vapors, told by Prudentius,⁶² is defended by

⁵² Hom., *Od.* 14, 327-330; S., *Tr.* 1164-1172; Pl., *Phdr.* 275b; A.R., 1, 523-527 and 4, 580-592, when he narrates that the Argos ship had a piece of wood taken from the Dodonaean oak and Zeus could speak through it; Philostr., *Im.* 2, 15; Paus., 7, 21, 2; Zenob., 6, 5; Sud., s.v. Δωδώνη. In these occasions the procedure varied, in some ribbons were hung on the branches (Philostr., *Im.* 2, 33).

⁵³ Ar., *Au.* 710-733; Str., Fr. 7, 1 and 1b. Piccinini 2012, pp. 291-292, explains that the doves would have sat on the oak, not flying, but in the references that presents as arguments (Str., Fr. 7, 2 and Ar., *Au.* 710-733) there is no such information.

⁵⁴ Call., *Del.* 277-287; Lucan., 6, 422-430; Aristid., *In defense of four*, 672; St.Byz., Δωδώνη (...ἔστι καὶ Δωδωναῖον χαλκίον παροιμία ἐπὶ τῶν πολλὰ λαλούντων, ὡς μὲν ὁ Δήμων φεσὶν ‘ἂπὸ τοῦ τὸν ναὸν τοῦ Δωδωναίου Διὸς τοίχους μὴ ἔχοντα, ἀλλὰ τρίποδας πολλοὺς ἀλλήλων πλησίον, ὥστε τὸν ἐνὸς ἐφάψηται’); Sud. s.v. Δωδωναῖον χαλκίον; also Philostr., *Im.* 2, 33, although in this case this author just indicates that the cauldron made sounds and was not an oracular instrument. As B. Kowalzig 2007, p. 331 explains that there has been a long debate among scholars over the expression λαλούντων, as if ‘babbling’, ‘speaking’ was not the crash of cauldrons, but maybe there were other elements, for instance the noise produced by the leaves of the tree.

⁵⁵ Demon (cf. St. Byz., Δωδώνη).

⁵⁶ Dieterle 2007, pp. 172-177.

⁵⁷ Quantin 2008, p. 15.

⁵⁸ Dakaris 1971, pp. 41-42.

⁵⁹ Cook 1902, pp. 13 and 28 (defending the apotropaic character of hitting the cauldron); Dakaris 1973, pp. 159-160.

⁶⁰ Str., Fr. 7, 3; Zenob., 6, 5 (he says it is a young boy); Plin., *HN* 36, 19, 92.

⁶¹ Plin., *HN* 2, 228; Mela, 2, 43; Lucr., 6, 879-889, tells a similar story.

⁶² Prud., *Apoth.* 439-444.

Scott Littleton.⁶³ However it seems likely that the author who lived during the Late Empire period just mistakes Dodona with Delphi, where this method was used.

Leaving these literary theories aside, it is compulsory to mention the archaeological material that excavations have recovered. Apart from bronze cauldrons, oracular plaques are the main object. Pilgrims wrote questions on these small pieces of lead (and a few of bronze), an uncommon procedure in ancient Greece.⁶⁴ There is just one possible (although unlikely) reference of it in literature.⁶⁵ The plaque was given back to the pilgrim. In some cases the answer is preserved, inscribed on the same piece.⁶⁶

By analyzing the texts and their dialectal variations it seems that the consultant usually wrote the question.⁶⁷ The lead tablet was folded or rolled, and later given to the staff of the shrine. On the outside was written a brief summary of the consultation, or the name of the person, usually abbreviated.⁶⁸ Some pieces include a large letter of the alphabet, a detail that has been interpreted as a way to establish an order among pilgrims.⁶⁹ We do not know the criteria for this ordering. Pilgrims may have been ordered by their time of arrival, or by their wealth or personal status. Thanks to dialectal variants some documents can be dated, although the fragmentary condition of many of these pieces makes this work hard. Despite this, the oldest fragments date from the 6th century,⁷⁰ and it is thought that the coming of the Romans to Greece on 167 BC. entailed the end of this method.⁷¹ Most of the consultations are dated on the 5th and, especially, 4th century. Tablets have not been found

⁶³ Scott Littleton 1986, p. 85.

⁶⁴ There are only a few analogue cases of other oracles and some of them dubious. There is one coetaneous, a tin tablet dated on 352 BC., in which Athenians asked the Delphian Pythia whether they should cultivate a sacred terrain of Eleusis or not (*IG*, 2, 1², 204; *SIG*, 204). Another later document comes from the temple of Apollo in Koropi (100 BC.), mentioned by Parke 1967, pp. 102-110. Given the scarcity in other shrines and the great amount of Dodona's, it can be concluded that this method was characteristic of the Epirote sanctuary.

⁶⁵ Cic., *Div.* 1, 34 (76) and 2, 32 (69). Cicero mentions a short story about a female ape owned by a king of Molossia; the animal knocked over a pot that contained several tablet. However this description does not provide further information about this topic.

⁶⁶ Lhôte N^{os} 35, 68, 83, 92, 95, 127, 136, 141, 142 and 146. There are only a few occasions, so it would not be the normal practice. Furthermore, in some cases they may not be answers.

⁶⁷ Christidis, Dakaris and Vokotopoulos 1999, p. 68. A recent hypothesis by J. Piccinini (2013) suggests that lead tablets were written after the consultation, not before, as a memento of the visit. Those who wanted their question to the oracle to be preserved in the sanctuary could write it on a plaque and leave it there. Although it is difficult to confirm, this theory is interesting. In any case, this possibility does not alter significantly the way the oracle functioned (i.e., the sound of cauldrons, etc.).

⁶⁸ Lhôte 2006, p. 68; Johnston 2008, p. 68.

⁶⁹ Lhôte N^o 80, 92, 96, 109, 111, 121, 125 and 145. For example, as in N^o 80 we can read B, the second letter of the alphabet, thus it would be the consultant n^o 2.

⁷⁰ See note 22.

⁷¹ Lhôte, 2006, pp. 11-21.

in specific ritual deposits.⁷² Is it possible as some scholars suggest⁷³ that pilgrims would bring them to their homes? All the plaques have appeared in Dodona. If pilgrims brought them to their homes, some of them would have been found; as these objects were symbolically meaningful for them, they would have tried to conserve them, be buried with them, etc. Taking into account all the evidence, it is not possible to confirm or deny this question, because tablets were so fragile and small that it is relatively easy to lose them. However, if all of the plaques that we know of come from the cultic space of Dodona, it seems more likely that pilgrims were not allowed to take them away.

Once all the possibilities have been analyzed, it is necessary to reconstruct the process of consultation at the oracle of Dodona, in order to show that there were changes through the centuries. First of all, some theories must be wrong, owing to the fact that some of them are directly contradictory. So it is a mistake to believe, as some scholars have done,⁷⁴ that all the references are right. There is only one method that can be safely confirmed: the employment of oracular tablets. Also cauldrons seem to have played a significant role, at least for some time, because many of them have appeared in the cultic area and some authors support this procedure. So the description of the oak surrounded by cauldrons with tripods fits well. Later they were likely replaced by a wall, but this does not mean that they were forgotten in the oracular consultation. The Korkyrean present could replace them at that moment, maybe being located near the oak. From that time onwards the oracle functioned by only one cauldron that was hit by the whip of a statue. The walls could have had a second function: to potentiate the sound. Once the whip of the statue struck the cauldron, the sound would rebound; there would be a reverberation on the walls with echoes, creating a special situation in the *temenos* of the temple of Zeus. Tablets and cauldrons surely formed part of the same ensemble. Initially, the pilgrim would write the question on lead and the priests or priestesses would find the answer through the sound of hitting cauldrons.

Some sources describe how Zeus used the oak to talk with human beings. Although this was not meant literally, perhaps it refers to the noise of the leaves being interpreted. Dendromancy should not be dismissed, at least in the beginning of the oracle, especially if we consider the way Homeric poems describe how the oracle functioned. With regard to the doves, although they are a characteristic icon of Dodona, they are probably popular because of the cult of Dione and the presence of the homonymous priestesses.⁷⁵ Maybe

⁷² Parke 1967, p. 101.

⁷³ Marsá 2007, p. 263.

⁷⁴ Nicol 1958, p. 133.

⁷⁵ Vilatte 1991, pp. 214-217.

they did not take part in the consultation,⁷⁶ or only in very special cases. The *Selloi* and the *Peleiades* did not formulate an answer to questions on their own, but interpreted and elaborated upon the noises described.

Phases and changes can be detected. Originally, if Homer is right, the oak functioned as the oracular element. At some point cauldrons were introduced. Some of them date from the 7th and 8th centuries. As they surrounded the oak, the significance of the tree remained. Without modifying this arrangement, in the middle of the 6th century, if not before, lead tablets began to be used. As it is something uncommon it is not possible to discern the reasons why this new practice began. The next change came with the construction in the first half of the 4th century of a wall that surrounded the *temenos*, instead of the cauldrons.



Fig. 3. Temple of Zeus (*Iera Oikia*) and the oak. Photo of the Author.

However these bronze artifacts did not disappear. Perhaps the present of Korkyrean people was employed in this period.⁷⁷ It may have been political developments that explain the construction of the wall, as we will discuss later. In 167 BC, Rome conquered Epirus, and the activity of Dodona declined gradually. In fact, lead tablets were no longer used.

⁷⁶ Racht 1962, p. 94, analyzes this possibility. However in none of the three fragments that he presents (Str., fr. 7, 2; Paus., 7, 21; Proxen., *FGrHis* 703 F7) it is told that birds were used to formulate the oracles. In fact, this scholar suggests that the term *πελειάδες* for priestesses would confuse some authors, who may have thought that they were doves.

⁷⁷ Racht 1962, p. 97, establishes a similitude between the crush and a lightning bolt, one of the characteristic elements of Zeus.

3. The multifunctionality of the sanctuary

Thus far I have given details of the historical development of Dodona over a number of centuries. The place gradually acquired new uses, so its sacred landscape changed too. In short, the shrine developed and strengthened its role as a multifunctional sanctuary.

3.1. Origins and first centuries

Dodona already existed in the second millennium BC. There is an ongoing debate about whether in the Mycenaean Age it was,⁷⁸ or was not,⁷⁹ a religious centre. The presence in Epirus of Helladic culture is scarce; materials appear especially in the Glykis Limen area, on the coast.⁸⁰ However, surprisingly Dodona, in the hinterland, is one of the places where more objects have appeared, such as Mycenaean ceramic from EH IIIA2 to IIIC.⁸¹ Nevertheless the most meaningful artifacts are made of metal. There are seven knives and daggers, two short swords, three spear points, an axe and twelve double axes.⁸² As these materials are usually connected to burials and there are no funerary structures at Dodona, it seems logical to think that they were votive offerings to the oracle.

Dodona could be a seasonal shrine, visited especially by shepherds,⁸³ because this was the main economic activity in the mountainous region of Epirus.⁸⁴ From the 8th century onwards votive offerings from people from Hellas and the colonies were deposited in Dodona.⁸⁵ In fact, it is worth pointing out that there is another site in Molossia, Vitsa, where archaeological evidence show a strong connection with Southern people. Here Corinthian materials appear in most of the tombs of that period.⁸⁶ This implies that the shrine of Dodona was open to overseas regions, further than the Epirus and Northern regions.

⁷⁸ Piccinini 2012, p. 116.

⁷⁹ Delcourt 1992, p. 50; Tartaron 2004, p. 21.

⁸⁰ About this topic, the best and most exhaustive work is Tartaron 2004.

⁸¹ Tartaron 2004, pp. 89 and 148.

⁸² Soueref 1999, pp. 31-32.

⁸³ Piccinini 2012, p. 71.

⁸⁴ Dakaris 1971, p. 17.

⁸⁵ Piccinini 2012, pp. 104-110.

⁸⁶ Vokotopoulou 1987, pp. 59-60.

3.2. The political role: the Kingdom of Molossia and the Epirote *Koinon*

At some point Dodona began to be controlled by the kingdom of Molossia⁸⁷ which had its origins in a mountainous region near the current lake Pamvotis. The exact date is unknown, but the construction of administrative buildings in Dodona near the cultic area in the 4th century is the *terminus ante quem*. It was then, if not before, although archaeological materials do not offer more information, when Dodona took on its multifunctional nature, becoming a powerful political centre in Epirus.

A *prytaneion* and a *bouleuterion* were built, both of them at the end of the 4th century, or at the beginning of the 3rd (probably during the reign of Pyrrhus I), as well as a stoa.⁸⁸ Simultaneously in the cultic area some structures were also constructed: the wall, the temple of Zeus, the temple of Dione... All of these new elements purposefully altered the landscape for the shrine.

These changes were due to the political development of the region. A situation that seems to have started at the end of the 5th century and the beginnings to the 4th. The first reference of the Molossian kingdom belongs to Thucydides, who tells of the episode of Themistocles, who had to escape from the Athenians and Spartans. He took refuge in the royal court of Admetus, king of Molossia.⁸⁹ This is the only information that we have about this monarch. The next known ruler is Tharyps, who at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War was a child.⁹⁰ From Tharyps onwards, there is a long list of kings of Molossia, all of them from the Aeacid dynasty that lasted until 232 BC, when the last monarch, Deidamia, died without heirs.⁹¹ Despite lacunae in some periods, it is possible to reconstruct two centuries of kingdom development. As sources show, as time went by the kingdom of Molossia became more powerful, controlling a bigger territory. A Molossian *Koinon* was formed, later a *symmachia* (alliance) with other Epirote ethne and finally an Epirote *Koinon*.⁹² During this expansion Dodona became part of the Molossian territory.

⁸⁷ Hyp., *Eux.* 4, 24-26, in a speech given at the time of Olympia of Epirus (373-315 BC), who was the wife of Philipp II and the mother of Alexander the Great. This event is subsequent to the death of the Macedonian king in 336 BC, when Olympia lived in Epirus. Hyperides criticized that she wanted to control the shrine, as it was her property.

⁸⁸ Dakaris *et alii* 1999, pp. 150-155; Dieterle 2007, pp. 136, 141.

⁸⁹ Nepos., *Them.* 8, 3; Plu., *Them.* 24, 2; Aristid., *Four.* 383; Aristodem., *FGrHis* 104 F10, 1-2.

⁹⁰ Th., 2, 80, 6; Plu., *Pyrrh.* 1, 4; Paus., 1, 11, 1; Iust., *Ep.* 17, 3, 9-13.

⁹¹ Ou., *Ib.* 305-308; Paus., 4, 35, 3; Polyæn., *Strat.* 8, 52; Iust., *Ep.* 28, 3, 5.

⁹² With regard to the debate recently re-opened about the formation dates of this *koinon*, with a reinterpretation of sources, see Meyer 2012. The re-interpretation of sources made by this scholar is accurate enough, although none of her arguments can be completely assured. The scarcity of documentation is the main problem that does not allow us to discern which theory fits better. Thus I follow the thesis of Hammond, which I still think is the most accurate one.

Epigraphic data suggests that several manumissions were performed in the shrine. The first document conserved dates from the kingdom of Neoptolemus I (370?-360?), shows several political offices.⁹³ In that time there were no administrative buildings at Dodona, or at least none have been found. Once the *boulenterion* and the *prytaneion* were built, documents describing the emancipation of slaves were put on pedestals in front of the eastern side of the *boulenterion*, and in front of the ionic colonnade of the *prytaneion*.⁹⁴ It is perhaps when these documents began to appear in Dodona that the sanctuary became a political centre. The Molossian Koinon had its capital in Passaron,⁹⁵ but as a Koinon was formed, Dodona could have served as a meeting point for all the ethne that compounded the confederation. We know this happened in other cases, including amphictyonies,⁹⁶ as for instance with Thermon and the Aetolian Koinon.⁹⁷

In 232 BC, after the end of the Molossian monarchy, the Epirote Koinon⁹⁸ functioned until 167 BC, when Rome conquered Epirus, devastating a significant part of its territory.⁹⁹ During these decades, Dodona was probably the capital and the place for meetings, although there are also some testimonies of councils in Gitani¹⁰⁰ and Phenice.¹⁰¹

3.3. Culture, sports and economy

There is no doubt that founding a festival was a significant change, although it was not always necessary to create one, existing festivals could be remodelled.¹⁰² There could be several reasons for doing this. New needs and demands of people may have forced the modification of some festivals. There can also be political motivations, as for instance to show the power of the new government. This can lead to the transformation of cultic centres into places of sport, locally or more widely.

⁹³ *SEG* XV, 384.

⁹⁴ Dakaris *et alii* 1999, pp. 155-156.

⁹⁵ Pliakou 2011.

⁹⁶ Funke 2013, pp. 10-12.

⁹⁷ McInerney 2013, p. 148.

⁹⁸ Formed at that moment, or maybe before, depending of the versions. See Meyer 2012.

⁹⁹ Plu., *Aem.* 29 in detail, and also Plb., 30, 15; Liv., 45, 34, 1-7; Str., 7, 7, 3; App., *Ill.* 9.

¹⁰⁰ Liu., 42, 38, 1, among others. Preka-Alexandri 1999, p. 167 suggests that this city could have been the capital for some times, but evidence only show meetings with Roman generals, for example.

¹⁰¹ Liu., 29, 12, 8-16. Thus a case similar to the one of Gitani.

¹⁰² Stavrianopoulou 2011, pp. 93-96 narrates a good example, the Athenian festival of the Targelian that was reorganized in the Roman Era, according to an epigraph from 129-128 BC (*SEG* XXI, 469 C).

This was the case of Dodona, where Naia were celebrated. This competition is attested from the 3rd century,¹⁰³ although it could have existed earlier.¹⁰⁴ During the Hellenistic Period many festivals were created in Greece,¹⁰⁵ and in Dodona this phenomenon is closely linked to the political development of Epirus, concretely the kingdom of Molossia, as a way to show its power. In fact, all the agonistic games established in the Hellenistic Period emerged for political reasons.¹⁰⁶ In order to celebrate the Naia, some buildings (theatre, stadium) were constructed in Dodona, in a way that changed completely the landscape of the sanctuary.



Fig. 4. Theater of Dodona. Photo of the Author.

Dodona was an oracle that as time went by acquired political power. It even eventually became the capital of a Koinon and was home of Pan-Hellenic games. Each of these functions entails several economic developments. Although this is not strictly related to the topic of this article, it is important to notice that economy influences all levels of a sanctuary¹⁰⁷ and it shows how Dodona was a good example of multifunctionality. Temples

¹⁰³ Cabanes 1988, p. 53.

¹⁰⁴ Maybe already on the 5th century, as some evidences linked to musical events may indicate (Piccinini 2012, pp. 82-83). This hypothesis could be right, but they would have just a local character during the 5th and 4th centuries, later becoming Pan-Hellenic.

¹⁰⁵ Chaniotis 2013, p. 28.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁷ I analyze this question in a recently published article: Chapinal 2014.

were also banks. The wealth of individuals or groups (including the treasure of a polis) was deposited there, loans were issued and money was exchanged.¹⁰⁸ As temples were religious spaces, they had an aura of inviolability, and were trusted places. Also, as Emmerling shows, some of the structures of Dodona that have been considered as temples may have actually been treasures.¹⁰⁹ As this sanctuary was the main religious centre of Epirus, it is likely to have functioned as a bank, at least for the Kingdom of Molossia and the Epirote Koinon. Pilgrimage also generated a wide network of business, as for example for accommodation and for buying offerings that were deposited in the sanctuary.¹¹⁰ The everyday activity of the shrine itself must be taken into account, as for instance the maintenance of the cult and the staff or the management of the place.¹¹¹

4. Conclusions

Everything changes; some aspects of this theme have been shown in this paper. The way these alterations are produced varies depending on the place and the epoch. Because of this, we have analyzed them separately, within their own context. In religion, changes can appear not only when a cult is replaced by another, but in the way this cult expresses itself. The functioning of a sanctuary (the consultation, the rituals...) is not fixed in time. It undergoes modifications, sometimes noticeable, sometimes not. It is not common for a sanctuary to take on completely new forms, more often they adapt. New functions are added and at the same time others are lost.

Dodona is an interesting case for analyzing these questions. As a religious centre for two millennia, it obviously did not remain static. There were variations. In its origin it may have been a chthonic cult, and later Zeus Naios became the tutelary god. In fact, due to its longevity Dodona was Christianized and a basilica was built. Probably both the *Selloi* and the *Peleiades* coexisted, although the male group was the sole initial staff; it is possible that the rise of pilgrimage to the shrine forced it to introduce (female) priests that finally replaced the *Selloi*. The role of cauldrons and tripods in the consultation has to be emphasized, especially its sound; it seems that this kind of instrument adapted to changes, such as the construction of the temple and the walls surrounding the sacred oak. The scarcity of sources makes it difficult to reconstruct in a clear and precise way how Dodona changed over time. However, this is the key point for scholars; it forces us to analyze all the

¹⁰⁸ Bogaert 1968, pp. 279-304.

¹⁰⁹ Emmerling 2012, *passim*.

¹¹⁰ Near the cult area there were usually workshops where pilgrims could buy votive offerings for the god (Snodgrass, 1983, pp. 23-24), although it is known that sometimes these people brought those objects from their place of origin or maybe they acquired them along the way.

¹¹¹ Migeotte 2009, pp. 48-49.

data as carefully as possible. Hence, some of the literature thus far may be incorrect. It is important to realize that religion must not be studied as something static, but dynamic.

Multifunctionality is another interesting aspect, closely related to changes. A centre usually does not have only one function. For example, a commercial site can also be a good place for artistic competitions. Some of these activities can appear in a specific moment, for definite reasons. It is to be expected that centres such as Dodona undergo change depending on the historical and political development of the region in which they are located. Sometimes new functions are added, sometimes they are lost. Dodona, again, demonstrates this: it was originally a sanctuary with, maybe, some commercial importance because it was on a terrestrial route to Europe; later it housed political and sports events. In fact, we have to keep in mind that most of the oracular tablets are dated on the 5th and, especially, the 4th century. Thus it can be thought that this was the main period of the oracle. Nevertheless, according to the building process and the literary sources, in the 3rd century Dodona seems to have experienced a huge development, becoming a Pan-Hellenic centre where competitions were held, as well as the capital of the Epirote Koinon. Therefore, is it possible that the oracular function decreased at the same time that its political, economic and cultural functions rose?

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POST SCRIPTUM

Prof. Parker has recently published an article concerning the use of a lot in the oracular consultation (R. Parker, *The Lot Oracle at Dodona*, Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik, 194, 2015, pp. 111-114). His theory is based partly on the appearance in the new *corpus* of some specific terms, as κλήροσ and ἀνατρεῖν, and it has strong arguments.