

Oracles and Sound – Their Importance at the Sanctuary of Dodona

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to explain how sound played an important role in the oracular consultation of Dodona. Both archaeological and literary sources provide information to sustain this hypothesis. It is possible that a special sound was produced by punching bronze cauldrons and tripods, and this could have been interpreted used in a consultation as the message from the god. This procedure is likely to have evolved over the centuries, as will be shown.

KEYWORDS: Dodona, sound, oracle

1. Introduction

The sanctuary of Dodona was located in the region of Epirus, in ancient Greece. The tutelary god was Zeus Naios. The sanctuary seems to have spanned a period of cultural activity of almost two thousand years, from the Bronze Age¹ to the Byzantine Era, although its most important period was from Archaic to Hellenistic ages. In fact, Dodona was considered by Greek people to be their oldest oracle². Several publications have focused on Dodona. They have analysed the available sources (archaeology, literature, epigraphy and

numismatics) with regard to its cults and pilgrimage phenomenon³, as well as the way the oracle functioned⁴.

It is possible that this Epirote sanctuary held consultations in which sounds were a significant element. The main problem regarding Dodona is the scarcity of sources, but at least in this case, there is varied evidence that allows us to argue this theory. Archaeoacoustics is an emergent archaeological field mostly focused on prehistory and topics⁵, or at least themes that suffer from precisely this problem. In the

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² It is not clear whether Dodona already had a religious function in the Late Bronze Age. The main argument supporting this thesis is the presence of weapons (Kilian-Dirlmeier, 1993, N^{os} 82, 208, 209, 430; Soueref, 1999, pp. 31-32), especially the little axes whose size and shape show that they cannot be employed for any kind of activity but ritual (Piccinini, 2012, p. 94). Some scholars criticise this thesis (Tartaron, 2004, p. 21).

³ Hdt., 2, 52, 2.

⁴ Mainly Hammond, 1967; Parke, 1967; Dakaris, 1973; Dieterle, 2007; Piccinini, 2012.

⁵ Especially Cook, 1902; Nicol, 1958; Rachet, 1962; Mylonopoulos, 2006; Tzouvara-Souli, 2007.

⁶ As for instance some of the contributions of Archaeoacoustics I: Coimbra, 2015; Debortolis, P., Tirelli, G. and Monti, F. (2015).

case of Dodona, we do have material evidence, as well as literary. This means that it is easier to discern the importance of sound in the oracle. However, as will be demonstrated, there is another problematic aspect: the variety of versions with regard to the manner of consultation.

2. Literary Information

Ancient authors provide information about different ways of consulting the oracle of Dodona. In essence, rites change because society itself changes⁶. As this sanctuary existed for so long, it is logical to think that it was not always the same, but modifications were introduced. In fact, some of descriptions of Dodona can be even contradictory.

First of all, the oracular element of the sanctuary was a sacred oak (δρῦς). Its magical character in Dodona is a recurring aspect in several works, usually because it spoke; that is to say, because Zeus spoke through it⁷. On these occasions the procedure varied, as for instance when ribbons were hung on the branches⁸. A second element is the dove⁹. This kind of bird is linked in some versions to the origins of Dodona¹⁰. The role of doves in oracular

activity may be related to divination through the flight of birds, something observed in many places and cultures. Some ancient authors explain this theory¹¹.

There is a third possibility. Originally cauldrons with tripods may have surrounded the cult area of Dodonaean Zeus¹². Several passages report that a cauldron ‘speaks’ when it is hit, producing a sound¹³. Another version, quite similar, describes a present given by the Korkyrean people to Dodona. According to Strabo, this present consisted of a statue of a man holding a bronze whip with bones at the end of its three chains; these would hit the cauldron, producing a noise that could be interpreted as the words of a god¹⁴. Zenobius also talks about two columns: a cauldron over one of them, and the statue of a kid with a whip over the other¹⁵. This seems to be the same image. Pliny the Elder, on behalf of Zenobius, recalls the Egyptian pyramids, on top of which were bronze spheres with chains that, in the wind, made a sound, and which Pliny compares with Dodona¹⁶.

There are some other theories that add a new element, usually a fountain or spring that has the ability to put out the fires of torches, and of lighting those that were out¹⁷; but

⁶ Chaniotis, 2002, p. 43.

⁷ Hom., *Od.* 14, 327-330; S., *Tr.* 1164-1172; Pl., *Phdr.* 275b; A.R., 1, 523-527 and 4, 580-592, when he explains that the ship Argos had a piece of wood taken from the Dodonaean oak, and Zeus could talk through it; Philostr., *Im.* 2, 15; Paus., 7, 21, 2; Zenob., 6, 5; Sud., s.v. Δωδώνη.

⁸ Philostr., *Im.* 2, 33.

⁹ In some coins minted in Dodona the oak and three doves appear together. For these, see Papaevangelou-Genakos, 2013, pp. 138-141.

¹⁰ Hdt., 2, 54-57.

¹¹ Ar., *Au.* 710-733; Str., Fr. 7, 1 and 1b. Piccinini, 2012, pp. 291-292, maintains that doves would be seated on the oak, not flying, but in the references presented as support (Str., Fr. 7, 2 and Ar., *Au.* 710-733) there is no such information.

¹² Demon (cf. St.Byz., Δωδώνη).

¹³ Call., *Del.* 277-287; Lucan., 6, 422-430; Aristid., *In defense of four*, 672; St.Byz., Δωδώνη (‘...ἔστι και

Δωδωναῖον χαλκίον παροιμία ἐπὶ τῶν πολλὰ λαλούντων, ὡς μὲν ὁ Δήμων φεσὶν "ἀπὸ τοῦ τὸν ωαὸν τοῦ Δωδωναίου Διὸς τοίχους μὴ ἔχοντα, ἀλλὰ τρίποδας πολλοὺς ἀλλήλων πλησίον, ὥστε τὸν ἐνὸς ἐφάπνηται"); Sud. s.v. Δωδωναῖον χαλκεῖον; also Philostr., *Im.* 2, 33, although this author only says that the cauldron made sounds and was not an oracular instrument. As Kowalzig 2007, p. 331 explains, there has been a long debate among scholars about the expression λαλούντων, as if ‘babbling, speaking’ was not the crash of cauldrons, but there may have been other elements, such as the noise of the leaves of the tree. In my opinion, λαλούντων refers to the sound produced by hitting the object.

¹⁴ Str., Fr. 7, 3.

¹⁵ Zenob., 6, 5.

¹⁶ Plin., *HN* 36, 19, 92.

¹⁷ Plin., *HN* 2, 228; Mela, 2, 43; Lucr., 6, 879-889, tells a similar story.

none of these fragments indicate that it functioned as an oracle. The employment of hallucinogenic vapours, described by Prudentius¹⁸, is defended by Scott Littleton¹⁹, however it is more probable that the author, who lived during the Late Empire period, simply mistakes Dodona with Delphi, where this method was used.

Epigraphy provides information about one procedure that does not appear in literary source²⁰: the lead tablets, where pilgrims wrote their questions for the oracle²¹. Fortunately many of these pieces were preserved; the oldest ones date to the 6th century BC.²² In any case, the presence of tablets does not significantly alter the way the oracle functioned because it was just the beginning (or the end, if we consider Piccinini) of the consultation process.

The staff at the sanctuary also needs to be mentioned. These were simply the means used to consult the oracle; it does not seem that the god spoke through them, as at Delphi, for example. Two different groups are known. One was the *selloi* (Σελλοί). Their customs are highlighted in Homeric poems: they did not wash their feet and used to lie on the ground so they could stay in constant contact with Mother Earth²³. On the other hand the priestesses were called *peleïades* (Πέλειαί or Πελειάδες, a word also commonly used for doves, which was specifically one of the symbols of the

sanctuary)²⁴. It is not sure which group existed since the beginning of the oracular activity. Also their responsibilities are unknown. But it is not necessary for us to analyse that in this article.

3. Cauldrons, Tripods and the *Ἰερὰ Οἰκία*

The landscape of Dodona changed over the centuries. As explained above, we must avoid the image of a sanctuary and its cults as something static. Modifications are introduced; it is a dynamic process. These alterations can be unconscious, but there are normally one or more reasons for them²⁵. In the case of Dodona, some landscape alterations occurred mainly due to the political development of Epirus, especially the region of Molossia. The aim of this paper is to analyse the manner of consultation and the role of sounds, but in order to do that it is essential to understand, at least to some extent, the political context. At the end of the 5th century or the beginning of the 4th B.C., Dodona was controlled by the kingdom of Molossia, ruled by the Aeacid dynasty. During the 330s, it seems that there was an alliance (συνμαχία) among the Molossians and other Epirote *ethne*. Later, ca. 232 B.C., the last of the kings died and the monarchy ended. This entailed the configuration of the Epirote *Koinon*, covering most of the region of Epirus, which functioned until the Roman conquest in 167 B.C.²⁶ During this time Dodona was not

¹⁸ Prud., *Apoth.* 439-444.

¹⁹ Scott Littleton, 1986, p. 85.

²⁰ Except maybe on Cic., *Diu.* 1, 34 (76) and 2, 32 (69).

²¹ 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 tablet and leave it there.

²² Lhôte, 2006, p. 11, with only a few epigraphs can be dated with exactitude, N° 41 and 77. More recently the new *corpus* of oracular tablets of Dodona edited by Dakaris *et al.* in 2013 adds a larger number of pieces dated to this century: 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.

²³ Hom., *Il.* 16, 235.

²⁴ Hdt., 2, 54-57.

²⁵ Brandt, 2012, p. 146.

²⁶ There are several works focused on this topic. See Hammond, 1967; Cabanes, 1976 and, more recently, Meyer, 2012, with a reinterpretation of sources and a new hypothesis with regard to the (supposed) alliance.

only a religious centre, but also a political one, and because of this its landscape was modified. Such alterations changed the way the oracle was consulted.

When we try to find material evidence of the literary descriptions of the oracular procedure, two elements appear. The first is the bronze cauldrons and tripods. The oldest pieces are dated to the 8th century²⁷; and most of these bronze objects are dated to the 8th and 7th centuries, although there are some others more recent²⁸. It is worth pointing out that tripods do not appear only in Dodona. They were a Panhellenic symbol whose presence was common in other sanctuaries

in this period, such as at Olympia and Delphi²⁹. However, as noted, some literary fragments describe the sacred oak as surrounded by these objects, and Stephanus from Byzantium talks about the “bubbling tripod”. That is only found in Dodona. Dieterle suggests that in this case they would be specific votives, possibly linked to the consultation³⁰.

The second archaeological evidence is the temple of Zeus. When Polybius mentions it, he says *ἡ ἱερὰ οἰκία*, literally “the sacred house”³¹. Fig. 1.



Fig. 1: Temple of Zeus / Hierapolis (picture taken by author)

²⁷ Dieterle, 2007, pp. 172-177.

²⁸ The two best catalogues of these materials are presented by Dieterle, 2007, and Piccinini, 2012.

²⁹ Himmelmann, 2001; Papalexandrou, 2008.

³⁰ Dieterle, 2007, pp. 176-177. One good argument is that for a tripod with a dedicatory, made by a rhapsod Terpsikles (SGDI 5786).

³¹ Pib., 4, 67, 3.

This building shows four different constructions phases, and maybe a fifth one in the Roman period. The oldest structure was erected at the end of the 5th century or beginning of the 4th B.C.¹. It is not surprising that in this epoch the kingdom of Molossia began to control Dodona. It was a small *naiskos* of 4.20 x 6.45 m.², consisting of a *pronaos* without columns and a *cella*³. Later, in the second half of the fourth century⁴, the *temenos* was demarcated with a wall of 13 x 11.80 m. It is worth noting that the ensemble did not line up the entrance of the wall with the temple. The *naiskos* was located near the northwest corner. This may be due to the presence of the oak in the eastern part⁵, which could mean that in this period the importance of the sacred tree was still greater than that of the temple. The third phase took place during the reign of Pyrrhus, in the beginning of the 3rd century B.C.⁶ The isodomic wall was replaced by a larger one of 20.80 x 19.20 m. The Ionian colonnades were added in the north, west and south sides, as three stoas. The east wing does not show any evidence of columns, which is probably linked to the presence of the oak⁷. In 219 B.C. the Aetolian *Koinon* attacked Dodona. Polybius describes the destruction of the sacred house⁸, although Diodorus says that the temple did not suffer any damage⁹. In fact, Dakaris did not find marks of burning in this epoch¹⁰. After the struggle, Philipp V of Macedon and the Epirote *Koinon* restored the sanctuary. Even if the temple of Zeus was not attacked, it is certain that it was modified, becoming a bigger Ionian

structure with four columns in the facade. The colonnades were rebuilt and a propylaeum was placed in the entrance of the wall. Both temple and propylaeum lined up with the centre, so the ensemble gained more symmetry¹¹. Fig. 2 and Fig. 3

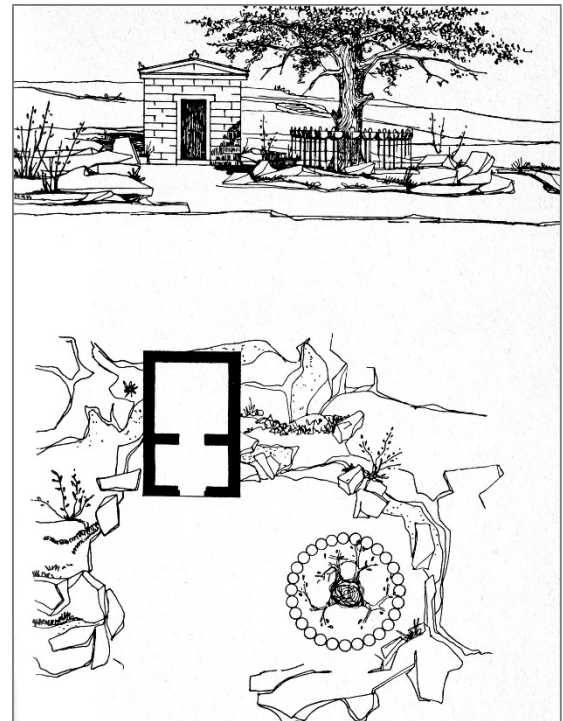


Fig. 2: Reconstruction of the temple of Zeus, end of V century B.C. (Dakaris, 1973, p. 153)

What happened to the cauldrons and tripods when the temple was built? As this objects surrounded the oak, it is possible that when the wall was erected they were no longer necessary, or perhaps there was less space for them. In fact, most of the cauldrons and tripods are dated to earlier centuries, and only some seem to have been used again later. This can be linked to a decrease in

¹Dating depends on the author: the end of 5th century (Dakaris, 1971, p. 40), ca. 400 (Hammond, 1967, p. 508), or first half of 4th century B.C. (Quantin, 2008, p. 15).

² Hammond, 1967, p. 508.

³ Mylonopoulos, 2006, p. 190.

⁴ Mylonopoulos, 2006, p. 191.

⁵ Dakaris, 1971, p. 42.

⁶ Parke, 1967, pp. 118-119; Dakaris, 1971, p. 43.

⁷ Dakaris, 1971, p. 43.

⁸ Plb., 4, 67, 3: *παραγενόμενος δὲ πρὸς τὸ περὶ Δωδώνην ἱερὸν τὰς τε στοὰς ἐνέπρησε καὶ πολλὰ τῶν ἀναθημάτων διέφθειρε, κατέσκαψε δὲ καὶ τὴν ἱερὰν οἰκίαν* (“when he [Dorimachus, the Aetolian general] came to the sanctuary of Dodona, he burned the stoas, destroyed many of the votives and devastated the sacred house”, personal translation).

⁹ D.S., 26, 4, 7.

¹⁰ 1973, p. 163.

¹¹ Dakaris, 1971, pp. 46-48; Hatzopoulos and Mari, 2004, p. 508.

their prominence in the sanctuary and in the oracular consultation. A change therefore occurred and it was probably when the Korkyrean present was introduced. Only one cauldron hit by the whip of a statue of a man or a boy could have been placed inside the *temenos*, near the oak.

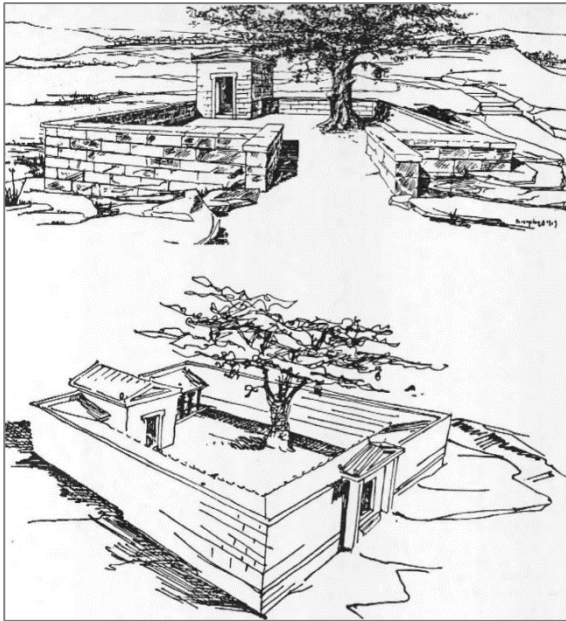


Fig. 3: Reconstruction of the temple of Zeus, IV (up) and III century (down) (Dakaris, 1973, p. 161)

2. Sound in Dodona

Each oracle functioned in a different way. For example, in Delphi hallucinogenic vapours were used. In other places the flight of birds was important. In the case of Dodona, I think that sound was paramount.

The archaeological evidence fits well with the presence of cauldrons and votives, especially in the Archaic Age and in part of the Classical. The decrease in numbers coincides with the modification of the sacred space: the temple and the wall demarcated the area; this could have meant that the circle of tripods and cauldrons surrounding the oak needed to be readapted.

It is possible that when this took place the Korkyrean present came to Dodona¹².

What was the role of sound in this oracle? If the hypothesis written above is correct, there were two phases. In the first, many cauldrons and tripods surrounded the tree. By hitting all of them at the same time, the noise would create a mystical ambience, which could be interpreted as the message of Zeus. This would also increase the sacredness of the place, and especially of the oak, the tree of the god.

In the second phase, only one cauldron remained, hit by the whip of the statue. It maybe thought that this sound only would not be enough, but the walls could have had a second function: to strengthen this sound. Once the whip of the statue hit the cauldron, the sound would rebound; there would be a reverberation from the walls with echoes, creating a special situation in the *temenos* of the temple of Zeus. The height of the walls varied, they became bigger in each reconstruction. The original walls were 1.08 m. in the eastern part and 1.50 in the western¹³. It is true that at first the height of this perimeter was perhaps not enough to strengthen the vibrations properly, but in later phases this was solved with higher walls.

I therefore, suggest that sound played an important role in Dodona, and changes in this sanctuary adapted to it in a conscious way. The political context, especially the control of Dodona by the Molossian Kingdom, could also have entailed changes to the sacred landscape and the manner of consultation. Dodona became an important political centre for the kingdom and, later, for the Alliance and the *Koinon*. As a result, the place suffered various modifications, such as building several religious and administrative structures. One of these constructions was the temple of Zeus,

¹² Dakaris, 1971, pp. 41-42.

¹³ Mylonopoulos, 2006, p. 191.

because until then the only sacred element was the oak. Its presence forced changes in the consultation procedure.

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