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DODONA: AN ORACLE OF ZEUS

by

Lawrence Treadwell III

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CHAPTER ONE

Lord Zeus, of Dodona, Pelasgian, dwelling afar, ruling over hard-wintered Dodona, and around dwell the Selli your interpreters, of unwashed feet, sleeping on the ground.¹

The above prayer is spoken by Achilles in Homer's Iliad and is the oldest written reference to the Oracle of Zeus at Dodona. These twenty-six words stir the mind of the historian to seek the answers to many questions. Where is Dodona? How did it originate? Does the oracle at Dodona compare with the oracle at Delphi? How was the oracle consulted, and by whom? What types of questions were put to the oracle? What was the historical role of the oracle? What were the instruments used by Zeus to answer his petitioners? Was there an organized priesthood at Dodona?

The Researcher's Problem

The oracle at Dodona, although important in ancient times, is relatively unknown today. Basically there are two reasons for this obscurity: the lack of ancient written sources, and incomplete archaeological work. The writers of antiquity were content merely to allude to the oracle's presence

¹Homer Iliad 16. 236. Translators for this and succeeding primary source excerpts are listed in the bibliography.

with such comments as legend tells of an oracle of Zeus at Dodona. Perhaps the reason for this historical oversight is because the oracle, throughout its history, preferred to deal with the common man and his problems, rather than with the weighty problems of state. The lack of complete archaeological work has also seriously hampered the accumulation of knowledge. Lack of funds curtailed the work of D. Evangelides in the 1930's, and the work of Carapanos, done before the turn of the century, has lost much of its value due to the haphazard methods used.

Because of the lack of knowledge, modern writers prefer to take the same view as their ancient counterparts and merely admit the existence of the oracle. Although there will be many questions raised here which are unanswerable today, this study is an attempt to set forth what is known and believed by modern scholars about Dodona and to show the importance of the oracle in classical times.

Greek Oracles

Before an understanding of Dodona and its importance can be undertaken, some background knowledge of oracles in general is needed. To the ancient Greek, the most satisfactory means of ascertaining the future was the use of an oracle. At these sacred sites men could actually ask questions of some mouthpiece of the gods. Throughout the ages

man has sought to learn the mysteries of the future and the riddles of the past. This appears to have been the function of the oracle.

Authorities have numbered over 260 oracles in the ancient Greek-speaking world. Some of these were of great importance and were regularly consulted by heads of state and other public officials. Others were of almost no importance and appear to have been used only locally and died out rather quickly.² The major oracles, those that lasted for an extended period of time and achieved a degree of fame, were at Colophon, Xanthus, Claros, Branchidae, Olympia, Amun, and of course, Delphi and Dodona.

A Greek oracle was simply a center of religious worship where some form of divination was systematized. Oracles were just one of a great many different cult practices, but no other practice was more universal than the consultation of oracles. People in all walks of life consulted them for help with every type of problem. Many of the questions asked reflect the wistful, utterly human character of the problem submitted.³ Oracles were not always consulted for advice or answers to problems but also to seek blessing on an enterprise

²Sir Henry Lunn, Aegean Civilization (London: Ernest Beun, 1925), p. 231.

³Frederick C. Grant, Hellenistic Religion (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1953), p. 33.

already begun. Although the practice of consulting oracles in public and private interests was well developed by Homer's time, it is safe to assume that there were no active oracles, in the classical sense, before 800 B.C.⁴ It was common belief that in the heroic age the gods spoke directly to man and did not need a mouthpiece. However, with the dawn of the classical age the gods ceased their direct contact with man and spoke only through oracles which, of course, needed to be interpreted.⁵

In the beginning all oracles were delivered by the Earth-goddess, whose authority was so great that patriarchal invaders made it a practice to seize her shrines and either appoint new priests or retain the old ones. Thus, it is probable that Zeus, at Dodona, took over the cult of the oracular oak which had been sacred to Dia or Dione.⁶

It must be understood that the Greek really believed in the legends we refer to as mythology. To him they were the true adventures of his gods and were as sacred to him as the Bible is to Christians today. The search for passages

⁴T. Dempsey, The Delphic Oracle (Oxford: B. H. Blackwell, 1918), p. 81.

⁵Howard Fremont Stratton, Dodona (Philadelphia: By the Author, 1937), p. 74.

⁶Robert Graves, The Greek Myths (Edinburgh: R. and R. Clark Ltd., 1955), pp. 180-81.

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and omens from the gods to man existed everywhere and the people paid a great deal of attention to what the gods "had to say." The oracles were especially important to the rural people who retained their more primitive beliefs. Cities often tried graft to obtain favorable responses, and the oracles became linked with politics, which started their eventual downfall.⁷

The Greek god did not speak in unequivocal terms but gave his responses in ambiguous phrases. Thus the petitioner, when he had received his answer, was left with the problem of reading it in at least one of two ways. If he misjudged the advice it was his own fault. To take an oracular answer at face value often left the petitioner unprepared for his fate in spite of the warning he had received. In any case, the god was never wrong.

The Greeks did not rely on astrological weather predictions. No oracle was expected to prophesy droughts or periods of plenty from the constellations, as was the practice of the Babylonians. Under extreme pressure the priests might hazard a "guess" but they much preferred to stay clear of weather and stick to less risky horoscopes.⁸

⁷Martin P. Nilsson, Greek Folk Religion (New York: Harper Brothers, 1940), p. 132.

⁸Richard Lewinsohn, Science, Prophecy and Prediction (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1961), p. 178.

The Location and Site of Dodona

In order to understand the position of the oracle at Dodona, how it retained its influence as long as it did, and why in the end it gave way to the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, it is of importance to know the geography of the area. Dodona is in Epirus, a cold, stormy, windswept country in northwestern Greece along the Ionian Sea. Mount Tomaros, the home of the oracle, lies a two-day march from the sea into the heart of Epirus. The grove of sacred oaks is located 1600 feet above sea level on the western side of the mountain toward the head of the deep valley of Tcharacovista, some twelve miles from the modern town of Jannina. The region was earlier well wooded and still is freely scattered with deciduous trees. The bottom of the valley is marshy, and Mount Tomaros provides plentiful springs and wells.⁹ The Pindus Mountains form such a barrier against the traveler from the east or south that the Greek who wished to consult the oracle would generally approach from the southwest by way of the sea; this meant a long journey and not a short one. Thus, the person who wished to consult the god either had to be extremely

⁹H. W. Parke, Greek Oracles (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1967), p. 20; Robert Flaceliér, Greek Oracles (London: Elek Books, 1961), p. 15; H. W. Parke, The Oracles of Zeus (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 3.

devout and really believe in the answer he would receive or else he must have had a burning sense of curiosity.¹⁰

The very name Dodona may have some connection with the geography of the area. German historians have established the fact that at Dodona it thunders on more days of the year and more violently than anywhere else in Europe. It is at Dodona that the peals are loudest due to the echo among the Pindus Mountains. Thus, the theory has been put forth that the name Dodona may be derived from the sound of a thunderclap.¹¹

The ancient Greeks believed it was here the voice of Zeus could be heard when the wind stirred the foliage of the oak.

Hesiod is the first to describe the area historically.

In his poem the Eoiai he states:

There is a certain Hellopia of much cornland and good meadow rich in flocks and shambling cattle, and in it dwell men of many sheep and many kin, many themselves in number, past telling, tribes of mortals. There a certain Dodona is built as a town at the furthest bound. Zeus loved it and appointed it to be his oracle revered by men and they [the doves] dwelt in the hallow of the oak [LACUNA] where those who live on earth and fetch all their prophecies, whoever of them has come thither and inquired of the

¹⁰ Geoffrey Cross, Epirus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), p. 5.

¹¹ F. W. H. Myers, Essays Classical (London: Macmillan & Co., 1883), p. 23.

immortal god bringing gifts when he came and accompanied by good omens with auspicious [flight of birds].¹²

This passage shows Dodona to be prosperous as an oracular site and functioning as late as the seventh or eighth century B.C.

At the site, a dove is said to spread its wings over the topmost branches of the ancient trees, around which were twined garlands of flowers. About the circle of sacred oaks stood the sacred tripods in which incense fumed and an army of priests and priestesses received the offerings.

General Background

The site at Dodona was inhabited as early as 19-1700 B.C. as is dated from the pottery remains which have been recovered in the area. These remains are very similar in style, pattern and type to those found on sites in Macedonia and Thessaly which have been dated to the same period. There are no prehistoric dwellings remaining, which suggests that these early settlers were nomadic or migratory in their habits and that they arrived seasonally with their flocks to graze on the rich meadows described by Hesiod.¹³

¹² Hesiod The Catalogues of Women and Eoiae 97.

¹³ Ibid.

The oracle, according to Strabo, was established by the Pelasgi who are said to be the most ancient people that were sovereigns in Greece.¹⁴ Other sources which point to the founding of the oracle by the Pelasgians are: the Hesiodic poems, which designate the settlement near the oak of Dodona as Pelasgic; Herodotus, who calls it the seat of the Pelasgians; and Ephorus, who states that the Pelasgians were the founders of the oracle.¹⁵ These Pelasgians seem to have been North-Aegean people uprooted by Bronze Age migrations and forced down into Epirus.¹⁶ They are generally thought to have inhabited the area around Dodona before the early migrations were completed. At the time the migrations were ending, some of these Pelasgians apparently decided to remain at the site and set up a priesthood. The fact that these peoples were the first to inhabit the site is acknowledged by the fact that the oracle is generally referred to as the "home of the Pelasgians."¹⁷

¹⁴Strabo Geography 7. 9.

¹⁵Herodotus Histories 2. 56.

¹⁶The Oxford Classical Dictionary, (1949), 658.

¹⁷N. G. L. Hammond, Epirus (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 368.

It is at Dodona that the almighty Zeus, who announced his presence in the speaking of the oak, gave his sign to mankind. The oracle is said to have retained its importance for over 1500 years from the time of its founding to its sacking by the Christians. Historically, the shrine has been ruled by a number of peoples. Originally the Pelasgians controlled the oracle but they gave way to the Thesprotians who were in turn followed by the Molossi. It is unfortunate, but there is no record of exact dates for the change of ruling powers.¹⁸ After the Molossi, the land went to the Macedonians. The first sign of Macedonian takeover was during the reign of Alexander I of Molossi, who ruled from 342-330 B.C. The reason for the Macedonian leanings is quite easily understood when it is remembered that Alexander was placed on his throne by Philip II of Macedon.

Dodona has laid claim to being the oldest oracle in the Greek world, and this claim seems to have a certain amount of validity to it. The proof for this claim is twofold: literary and archaeological. Divination by natural manifestations, such as the rustling of the oak and the sound of thunder, which need to be interpreted by a prophet is consistent with the primitive status of Greek religion as illustrated

¹⁸ Strabo Geography 7. 11.

by episodes in the Greek epics. It is this evidence which confirms Dodona's claim to being the oldest oracle in Greece.¹⁹ The excavations done at the site of the oracle do not reveal any substantial number of dedications before 639 B.C. It is after this date that the heyday of Dodona began.²⁰

Zeus had three major oracular sites. They were Dodona, Olympia, and Amun, but it was only at Dodona that Zeus spoke through a temple-oracle. The first mention of the oracle (see page one) seems to indicate it was a dream oracle where the rude Selli drew their visions from the earth on which they slept. But the oracle in the works of Hesiod is spoken of as having its seat among the leaves or in the hollow or base of an oak, and this is the idea that prevailed in classical times.²¹

Because the oracle is the only one mentioned in the works of Homer, it may be that Homer knew of no other major oracle. In both of his works, the Iliad and Odyssey, his hero touches base with the oracle. Thus Dodona likely predates Delphi simply by proof of silence.²²

¹⁹Parke, Oracles, p. 25.

²⁰Hammond, Epirus, p. 436.

²¹Myers, Essays, p. 22.

²²Parke, Oracles, p. 16.

There is little written concerning the oracle until the time of Herodotus. After he visited the oracle in the forties of the fifth century B.C., he suggested an organization quite different from that of Homer. No Selli are mentioned; instead three priestesses, Promeneia, Timareta and Nikandra are named.²³ The sacred oak and doves are not treated as methods of consulting the gods. They only figure in legend connected with the founding of the oracle.

In spite of the fact that Herodotus gives the priestesses Greek names and suggests that the very name of Hellas came from this area, it does not exclude the fact that the blend of race and custom which originally determined the cult of the Dodonaean Zeus was not typical of the rest of Greece.²⁴

Dodona, unlike Delphi, Delos and Olympia, was far too remote to have a political ax to grind. Thus, the oracle at Dodona could devote its time and energies to furthering the cause of religion among the Greeks.²⁵

It should be also noted, with interest, that at Dodona there never seems to have been any form of cruelty practiced in the temple rites during the classical period. At Dodona, no assassin pursued his victim around the trunk of the tree;

²³Herodotus Histories 2. 55.

²⁴Parke, Oracles, p. 91; Parke, Zeus, p. 253.

²⁵R. L. Beaumont, "Greek Influence in the Adriatic Sea Before the 4th Century B.C.," Journal of Hellenic Studies, LVI (1936), 198.

instead three gray-haired priestesses listened to the murmurs of the sacred doves or the rustling of the leaves as mediums of the god's answers. Instead of being escaped convicts, the priests seem to have voluntarily accepted an ascetic life.²⁶

The power and influence of the oracle lasted and grew with the passage of time. Plato, writing his Laws in the 350's B.C., makes reference to the validity of the oracle. "It is laid down as an axiom that the legislator will not alter whatever has been established of indigenous or foreign cult, if it has received the sanction of the oracles of Delphi, Dodona, or Zeus Amun."²⁷

The sanctuary of Dodona seemed to form a little island of Hellenism among the barbarians of northern Greece. Dodona was the place where the subsequent national name of the Greeks can first be proven to have prevailed. The name is derived from the chosen few of the people who administered the worship of Zeus and were called both Selli or Helli and after them the surrounding country, Hellopia or Hellas.²⁸ For the name of an isolated priesthood to become so important as to be adopted by the rest of Greece as a national title serves to show the importance attached to this oracle.

²⁶ Stratton, Dodona, p. 75.

²⁷ Plato Laws 5. 738.

²⁸ Ernest Curtiss, The History of Greece, Vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), p. 116.

CHAPTER TWO

The Mythical Founding of Dodona

The ancient Greeks had several legends as to how the oracle at Dodona originated. These legends were so shrouded in mystery and steeped in tradition that not even the Greeks could decide what was truth and what was fiction. On the following pages are the four principal myths relating to the founding of the oracle at Dodona with some comments as to their apparent validity. Only the legend related by Herodotus was found in its complete form in a single source. The rest of the stories have been pieced together from several sources as accurately as possible.

Because of all the evil that existed in the world, Zeus and his brother Poseiden sent a great flood to destroy all that lived on the earth. Ducalion, a king of Epirus, and his wife, Pyrrha, managed to survive by clinging to a small raft. For nine days they were tossed about before Zeus remembered their piety and allowed them to come to rest on top of Mount Tomaros. As the water receded, the couple saw a temple in ruin and covered with debris. They decided to go to the temple to thank the gods for protecting them and ask advice as to what they should do about repopulating the earth. The gods instructed them to go forth and throw the

bones of their mother behind them. This the pair were afraid to do for fear of profaning their dead ancestors. However, the king remembered that the earth was the mother of everyone, and so they left the temple throwing the stones of earth behind them. When the stones landed they immediately became soft and warm. Those stones which had been thrown by Ducalion became men, and those thrown by his wife became women. These new people were a hardy race, well suited for the work that lay ahead. They called themselves Pelasgians and settled at the foot of Mount Tomaros where they established the sanctuary of Dodona.¹

Within this story an attempt appears to have been made to attribute age and historical importance to the oracle at Dodona. However, as this same myth has been told of several other sites in Greece, including Delphi, its validity may be doubted. Two of the oracles of Zeus, those at Amun and Dodona, show from an early date a linkage between their methods of oracular response and their priesthoods. Evidence has also been found indicating that these two oracles worked together to counter the rising influence of Apollo at Delphi. In the above myth there is no attempt to show this linkage or connection. The myth has all the appearances of being a classical concoction invented to give historical background to the oracle.

¹Strabo Geography 7. 11.

The second story concerns a woodcutter named Hellos. One day as he was searching for a tree to cut, he had the good fortune to stumble into the grove of oaks at Dodona. He selected a large tree and was about to cut it down when a dove flew by him, perched in the branches of the tree, and spoke to him in a human voice saying not to damage the sacred tree of Zeus. The woodcutter immediately laid down his ax and decided to become a priest of Zeus.²

The national name of Greece, Hellas, has been shown to originate in the name of the priests at Dodona. This myth attempts to show this connection in the name of the woodcutter, Hellos. Hellos is mentioned as establishing the priesthood alone, yet all other ancient sources refer to the priesthood at Dodona in the plural. The story also tells of the dove speaking to the woodcutter from the branches of the oak. In other historical writings, such as the Argonautica, the oak itself has the power of speech. If the oak has the power to speak by itself, why could it not do so here? Then too, there is no indication of a connection with the oracle at Amun. It would seem that the story is a later fabrication used to explain what had already happened.

²Philostratus Imagines 2. 33.

The third legend concerns a shepherd who kept his sheep in the marshes of Dodona. Desiring to increase the size of his flock, he stole his neighbor's best sheep and locked them in his own fold. The former owner tried to find the sheep among the flocks of his fellow shepherd, but could not. He then decided to petition the gods for help in finding his sheep and the thief who had stolen them. It is supposedly at this time the oak first spoke and said that it was the youngest of the followers who was guilty. After the shepherd had searched out the meaning of the god's message he found his sheep at the house of the man who had most recently come to the pasture. The thief's name was Mardylae, and it is said that in anger at the oak he seized an ax and went to cut it down. Just as he was about to lay the tree low, a dove spoke to him from a hole in the trunk and ordered him not to harm the sacred tree of Zeus. He became so frightened that he laid his ax aside and did not harm the tree.³

As in the preceding story, there again seems to be a contradiction here by having the oak speak, and then later when the life of the tree is in danger, a dove must speak to save the tree. This story also fails to show any establishment of a priesthood and makes no attempt to connect the oracles at Amun and Dodona.

³Homer Odyssey 14. 327.

The final story comes to us from Herodotus. According to his account, "two black doves took flight from Egyptian Thebes. One of these doves flew to Dodona in Epirus and alighted in the grove of oaks and began to chatter in a sacred manner. The other dove flew to Libyan Amun and there likewise began to chatter. In time, the doves acquired human speech and proclaimed that an oracle should be established on these sites to Amun."⁴

It becomes necessary to break down the symbolism used by Herodotus to see the historical fact which has here been veiled. It was common for a Greek to refer to the Egyptians as "black," thus giving color to the doves. The Greek word for "dove" and "old woman" have similar roots (see section on the Doves) and are often confused. Thus, the two black doves symbolize priestesses of Amun-Ra, the chief Egyptian god. Their flight was probably caused by capture, undoubtedly by Phoenician sailors who then sold them into slavery; one at Libya and one at Dodona. The reference to chattering is explainable in that the "doves" would not necessarily know

⁴Herodotus Histories 2. 55.

Greek when they arrived at their new homes. In time, as the doves acquired human speech, that is Greek, they proclaimed that an oracle should be established to the king of the gods, Egyptian Amun-Ra and Grecian Zeus.

This legend then explains the connection with the oracle at Amun which was so important throughout Dodona's history. Although a connection to the Selli and the oak are not mentioned, there is a possible explanation. Assuming that the two stolen "doves" were priestesses of the same temple in Egypt, the oracles they founded in Greece should have been similar. Since they are not, and since archaeological evidence at Dodona shows the site to be inhabited from early times, could it not be conjectured that a form of tree worship was practiced at the site before the "dove" arrived? Then, as the priestess learned Greek, her natural reaction would be to better her position. As chief priestess to the king of the gods, her position would definitely improve.

The Gods of Dodona

At the peak of its career, Dodona was the home of Olympian Zeus and his consort Dione, but this had not always been the case. Herodotus preserves the tradition that there had once been a time when the gods were nameless.⁵ Thus, the

⁵Herodotus Histories 2. 55.

gods, or spiritual forces, were too numerous to name, for only in this manner could such an important concept as a name be ignored. The worship of Zeus at Dodona probably arrived as a part of the migrations of Indo-European peoples around 1900 B.C. At this point, Zeus was the Aryan sky god, and only after centuries did he evolve into the king of the Olympian gods.

The fact that Zeus was associated at so early a date with the oracle of Dodona and that the cult is connected with so many aspects of nature: oaks, springs, echoes, and wind, suggest that Zeus was a later addition to a cult which was originally that of the mother-goddess in the manner of other pre-Hellenic cults.⁶ There is even a theory, although not a popular one, that the advent of the god came from a form of ancient tree worship.

At Dodona the cult name of Naios is associated with Zeus. The word Naios refers to the Greek verb "to flow." Thus in his capacity as Zeus Naios, the Aryan sky god was also referred to as the god of flowing water, the fertilizing rain and the dew.⁷ The numerous springs which flowed from Mount Tomaros provided the area with an abundant supply of water and so this connection was only natural. Later

⁶Hammond, Epirus, p. 369.

⁷Parke, Zeus, p. 68; Farnell, Greek States, Vol. I, p. 39.

sculptures depict the god of Dodona with dripping beard and hair, the oak wreath on his head, as if they were trying to further the connection to Achelous, the river god, to whom the oracle often commanded sacrifices should be made.⁸

Contrary to popular belief, Hera was never conceived or recognized as Zeus' accepted wife. It has just been convenient to attach the avowed queen of the gods to the king as his wife. It was only in the works of the late classical writers that references are found in which Hera is the wife of Zeus.⁹ Thus, at Dodona, Zeus was regarded as the husband of the earth-goddess. The early legends are probably right in saying that the association of the sky-god and the earth-mother began in post-Homeric times. There are two versions showing the connection between Zeus and the earth-goddess, Dione. The first is that Dione is the earth-goddess. Her priestesses, the Peleiades, and the priests of Zeus, the Selli, jointly attended the sanctuary. The second theory comes from the works of Aristotle, who informs us that the earliest home of the Hellenes was the countryside around Dodona. It was here, according to him, that Hera was called Dione or Dia which is

⁸Max Duncher, History of Greece (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1883), p. 169

⁹Stratton, Dodona, p. 57.

simply the feminine form of Zeus.¹⁰

Other sources attempt to connect Aphrodite with the worship of Zeus at Dodona, but there is no evidence of this in the inscriptions found at the oracle. Kerengi, in his book The Gods of the Greeks, states that Aphrodite was not the love-goddess' only name. "She also had the Greek name of Dione; this is the feminine form of Zeus and means 'goddess of the bright sky,' a fitting consort for Zeus."¹¹ At Dodona, Aphrodite was worshipped together with Zeus in his capacity as Zeus Naïos, being regarded as wife of the supreme god, a spring goddess, and a giver of oracles.¹²

Whatever the connection of Dione to Zeus, she remains a minor goddess, and at Dodona she is always secondary to Zeus in the inscriptions and questions. Zeus may be petitioned alone but Dione is never thus addressed.

Zeus was not only the god of the Greeks. He was connected throughout the rest of the Mediterranean world with the supreme god of other peoples. The Zeus of the Oasis is termed Zeus Asbystes after the Asbystai, a Libyan tribe occupying the hinterland of Cyrene, and under that

¹⁰ Louis Dyer, Studies of the Gods in Greece (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1891), p. 318.

¹¹ C. Kerengi, The Gods of the Greeks (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1951), p. 68.

¹² Ibid.

denomination is compared with the Zeus of Dodona:

Lo Zeus Asbystes' new-found answering voice
The thirsty sands oracular sent forth
To the Chaonian dove.¹³

The same comparison of the Egyptian with the Dodonaean

Zeus was made by Herodotus who declared that:

The oracular usage of Thebes in Egypt and the
oracular usage of Dodona in point of fact
resemble one another.¹⁴

Thus, Zeus was worshipped at Dodona with rites similar
to those used for the worship of Theban Amen-Ra and with the
Punic Ba'al-Hamman.¹⁵

Human Sacrifice at Dodona

The oracle at Dodona seems to have been considerably
more humane than many of the other oracles in the ancient
world. There does not appear to have been a great number
of human sacrifices performed at Dodona. In fact, there
is only one such incident recorded and that is by Dionysius
of Halicarnassus. Since it is the only such incident
recorded, one wonders whether it is fact or only myth.

The account of human sacrifice that reaches us today

¹³A.B. Cook, Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion
(New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1964), p. 363.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 778.

is not as brutal as one might expect. According to the story, Coresus, a priest of Dionysius at Calydon, loved the maiden Callirhoe. However, Callirhoe did not return his love and instead did her utmost to avoid any contact with him at all. The god, Dionysius, indignant that a priest of his should be so repulsed, sent "madness and death" on Calydon. At this point the oracle of Dodona intervened and ordered that to remove the madness and death from Calydon, Coresus must sacrifice Callirhoe, or someone who would willingly die in her place. A diligent search was made but no one was willing to take her place on the altar, not even her aged parents. Thus, in answer to the order of the oracle, Callirhoe stood up beside the altar to be slain. When Coresus looked on her, his love overcame his anger, and he slew himself in her stead. Callirhoe, upon seeing the sacrifice Coresus had made for her, turned her heart to him and beside the fountain, to which her name has since been given, she died by her own hand and followed him to the underworld.¹⁶

The horror of the crime has been somewhat subdued in the manner in which it was carried out. There is no other record at Dodona of the bloody tales of death and human sacrifice that are recorded at the other major oracles in the Greek world.

¹⁶Myers, Essays, p. 26.

A Comparison of Delphi and Dodona

Without a doubt the two most powerful oracles in the ancient world were the oracles of Zeus at Dodona and Apollo at Delphi. Throughout the classical era these two sites vied with each other for the role of the supreme oracle. That Dodona long preceded Delphi as a place of consultation is today widely accepted, since it has been dated as an active oracle to the Mycenaean age. However, there is some evidence that both oracles were functioning on a limited scale at the time of the Achaean and Dorian invasions. There is, however, no real substantial claim to the existence of the oracles in their classical form until the time of Homer.

The oracle at Delphi began to have political consultations at a late date. In Homer it is mentioned only once and even that is indirect. Homer recalls how Agamemnon "stepped o'er the threshold of stone in Hallowed Pytho."¹⁷ Since Homer fails to deal more directly with the oracle at Delphi, it is entirely possible that the oracle was not functioning on a major scale during the period in which Homer wrote. Although the oracle at Delphi was slow in developing, its fame grew so rapidly that by the sixth century B.C. Apollo's oracle clearly ranked highest in the eyes of the Greeks.

¹⁷Dempsey, Delphic Oracle, p. 81.

This has been substantiated by the archaeocological work done at the two sites.¹⁸

Also during the sixth century the oracle at Dodona was beginning to undergo some changes which can be traced to the influence of Apollo's oracle. At Dodona the substitution of the three priestesses for the Selli took place. These women quickly became the major instruments of the god at Dodona in much the same manner as the priestess at Delphi served Apollo. From this time on the oracle did reply through the use of verbal passages, but for the most part the god still replied by signs. At about this time divination by lot was being adopted and this also can be traced to the only other major oracle in the Greek world that adopted this system of divination during the period—the oracle at Delphi. Although the oracles were miles apart, these changes tend to show that there must have been some contact along professional lines.¹⁹

Dodona was the only place in Greece where Zeus spoke through a temple-oracle, that is, from a set and sacred place and not just through the mouth of a priest or priestess, as at Amun. Although the fame and popularity of Dodona paled before the rising star of Delphi, it still retained enduring repute among the northwestern Greeks down to the Christian era.

¹⁸ John Pollard, Seers, Shrines and Sirens (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1965), p. 150.

¹⁹ Ibid.

In its battle with Delphi for the premier position of Greek oracles, Dodona had two points in its favor. First, it was the oldest oracle, a fact acknowledged by all Greeks and by Delphi. Second, it was the oracle of Zeus, the father of the gods and men. The priests of Apollo could only reply by arguing that their god was the accredited spokesman of his father, a rather lame argument.²⁰ The Pythia at Delphi was faced with the fact that she spoke only for the son of the supreme god and so was obviously only second best. Beginning in the fifth century B.C., the Delphians claimed that the Pythian Apollo was the mouthpiece of Zeus and thus they could refute the idea that Apollo's prophecies were less authoritative than those that claimed to emanate from Zeus himself.²¹

It is worth noting that during classical times Dodona was the only rival of the Pythia and the only oracle which is frequently mentioned as an alternative authority of similar prestige. One curious feature is the literary conjunction of Delphi and Dodona. Although they are often named together as alternative sources of a prophecy in classical times, there is not a single substantiated

²⁰Parke, Zeus, p. 255.

²¹W. H. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, The Delphic Oracle, Vol. I (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), p. 364.

instance of them working in complete collaboration. Perhaps only one of the oracles was actually consulted concerning a given matter, but in the later retelling of the story, the other rival center was added to improve the authority of the prophecy. Thus, the petitioner could claim Delphi and Dodona as sanctioning his undertaking. The lack of real association between Delphi and Dodona is made all the more conspicuous by the fact that there are signs of good feelings between the oracle of Zeus Amun and Dodona. It looks, in fact, as if the two priesthoods of Zeus were more or less combined in rivalry with the oracle of Apollo.

One reason that perhaps led to a popularity of Dodona for the average man was that the methods of consulting Zeus were of a spontaneous nature and involved little human participation. The rustling of leaves and creaking of branches, the calls of the doves which haunted the area, even the peculiar features of the burnt offerings made to the god, were all spontaneous happenings which did not require a human agent so much as they did an interpretation. The actions of response were natural and thus more easily accepted as spiritual in origin.²²

Apollo was the god of oracles. His sanctuaries were usually in volcanic regions where gas escaping from a fissure in the earth might be inhaled. Thus, at these sites Apollo

²²Parke, Zeus, p. 256.

had the power to make men and women the mediums of his responses by throwing them into a state of inspiritional ecstasy in which they delivered, unconsciously, the words of the god. Apollo brought to Delphi the traditional methods of ecstatic prophecy which were able to fit in with the local tradition of the Earth-goddess. The reputation of Delphi was based on the power of the Pythia to act as the unconscious mouthpiece of Apollo—there is no evidence of this kind of prophecy at Dodona. Even during the height of its influence, Dodona remained a clear voice. No inebriated personification of the god was displayed to the petitioner, whereas at Delphi, the Pythia writhed in full view of her questioner.²³

At Dodona the questions are phrased so as to need only a single word or sign for an answer. The allusions to Dodona in Homer fit the pattern of divination by means of natural signs. This is directly opposed to the practices of Apollo at Delphi where answers are more symbolic in nature and require more interpretation on the part of the individual.

It cannot be said of Dodona that the oracle there contributed purposefully to any development in philosophy or

²³Stratton, Dodona, p. 57.

history. There are a few cases where the oracle may have had some effect on the course of history, but in these instances the events probably would have occurred whether the oracle had given its sanction or not. The oracle at Dodona regarded each petition as an individual one and did not try to express a continuous theme in its responses as was common at Delphi. Dodona realized that she was far too remote to foster any political ambitions;²⁴ therefore, unlike Delphi, Dodona preferred to deal with the common man rather than the wealthy states.²⁵

²⁴J. B. Bury, History of Greece (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1963), p. 88.

²⁵Parke, Delphic Oracle, p. 393.

CHAPTER THREE

The Sacred Oak

Throughout its history the oracle at Dodona has been associated with a sacred oak. It is this tree that is referred to in the historical writings concerning Dodona and it was the first form of prophecy used by the oracle. Dodona, unlike most other Greek oracles, almost always depended on natural signs to give its responses. The oak had most likely been sacred even before the classical period, and when Zeus developed into an important god he took over the ownership of the tree. Certainly the oak at Dodona was one of the most venerated relics in the Hellenic world.

Man's worship of nature has been with him a long time, for even prehistoric man derived his gods from the things around him. Thus, it was at Dodona that the last traces of nature worship appear to linger on. There can be little doubt that the tree was at first worshipped with no connection to any particular god other than itself.¹ In time Zeus became attached as the god who lived in the tree and his presence was observed in the rustling of the leaves. Thus,

¹Farnell, Greek States, Vol. I, p. 39.

Zeus took on a physical, although an invisible, aspect in the movements of the tree. Strabo indicated that the oak was worshipped at Dodona because it was thought to be the earliest plant created and the first to supply men with food.²

The speaking oak of Dodona was the first known voice from the higher realms. The oak had several important functions; it not only protected the magic spring, which gushed from its roots; gave rhythmic answers to the suppliants, who were questioners of the god's will; sheltered the prophetic doves, when they took up the oracular office; but it is implied that the first priests made their beds under its protecting spread of branches. One tradition also states the chief priestess gave her oracular messages from inside the bole of the oak. This would suggest an extremely large tree with a diameter of eight feet or more. If a hole in the trunk of the tree would allow a person to sit comfortably inside, it would have to measure nearly four feet across. This, coupled with enough remaining trunk to support the tree, would indeed suggest an oak of great size! It was from this tree that the keel of the ship Argo was cut according to mythology.³

²Strabo Geography 7. 2.

³Stratton, Dodona, p. 69.

From the beginning there seems to have been some sort of priesthood connected with the tree. The average man, who did not have a constant connection with the god of the tree, could not be expected to be able to understand the sayings of the god. Thus, the position of the Selli was secure. When a person consulting the oracle approached the tree, the branches were seen to tremble (probably due as much to the wind as to the petitioner's imagination), and then the priest's voice could be heard saying in a mystical chant, "Zeus declares...."⁴ The petitioner could be sure that it was Zeus speaking through the oak, because who but the king of the gods could be the inhabitant of so magnificent a tree?

It is worth noting that it is modern scholars, who have rationalized and set forth the premise, that the function of the Selli was to interpret the rustling of the leaves and the creaking of the branches. Indeed, a well developed case may be presented proving the role of the Selli in interpreting the god's will from the actions of the tree. However, there is absolutely no support in ancient literature that the movements of the tree were interpreted as messages from the god. The oak is said to "speak," not rustle or creak. Mention of interpretation of the actions of the oak do not occur before a very late period when in all prob-

⁴Flaceliere, Greek Oracles, p. 15.

ability the original oak had long since been dead and other forms of revealing oracles had been established. By this time the oak had become a symbol and its role as an instrument of the god's will was legendary.⁵ The men who wrote during the late Hellenic era were in all probability projecting, on the basis of myth, as to the early function of the priests concerning the oak. By Herodotus' time the speaking oak was a thing of the past, and the stress at the oracle was on human agents and other kinds of signs instead.⁶

Although a sacred oak was connected with Dodona throughout the oracle's history, it could not possibly have been the same tree. The mortality of the tree, in fact, suggests why there was a change in the methods of divination at the sanctuary. Dodona is the oldest known religious center in Greece, a fact to which the Greeks themselves attest. H. W. Parke, in his book The Delphic Oracle, dates the founding of Apollo's oracle to 1500 B.C.⁷ Thus, Dodona must have been functioning before this date. If there had been a single sacred oak, which had been the source of inquiry since before 1500 B.C. the problem of survival enters the picture. A tree 500 years

⁵Parke, Zeus, p. 27.

⁶Ibid., p. 56.

⁷Parke, Delphic Oracle, p. 5.

old would be exceptional and a tree of 700 to 800 years of age would possibly be the limit, as far as modern science can project, for the life span of a member of the oak family. Thus, an oak 100 years old in 1500 B.C., and surely the tree must have been at least this old to obtain any degree of magnificence, would be in the last stages of decrepitude by the seventh century B.C. The disposition of the buildings that finally arrived in the sanctuary suggest that in the fourth or third centuries a space was left for a sacred tree in a prominent position, and it is supposed that when the original tree began to die the priestesses would set about replacing it with another. During this transitional stage the system of drawing lots and the other methods of oracular responses were probably introduced and adopted.⁸

The Sacred Spring

Mount Tomaros produced an unusually great number of springs and wells, but the exact position of these springs in the oracular use of Dodona is unknown. In fact, the springs at Dodona are so obscure that written mention of them does not occur until after the oracle has ceased to exist as an active oracle. The basis for the conclusions are all theory and stem from the Greeks' belief in nature and its signs. It has been proposed that the priestess

⁸Parke, Oracles, p. 92.

listened to the bubbling of the spring, which gushed from the foot of the great tree, and carefully noted the gradations of sound, considering them as foretelling the events of the future and interpreting them according to established rules which have been lost for all time. It is quite possible that these established rules conformed with the desires of the questioner by the fourth century.

Pliny the Younger makes mention of an unusual property of the spring at Dodona. Whether this spring was used for prophecy or not is not known, but its properties are cause for some amazement. Starting at midnight the stream ran slower and slower until by noon the stream was dry, but from then on it picked up in intensity until by midnight it was again at its peak. Apparently, this spring had the power of lighting a torch as soon as it was touched to the water. Pliny tells that a lit torch plunged into the cold water immediately goes out. But a torch that has been put out is rekindled when it is brought in contact with the water.⁹ If this strange property was used as an oracular tool, the mechanics of it are not known to us today. Most probably it was used as an ancient sideshow to entertain the visitors to the oracle with displays of the power of the god who inhabited the area.

⁹Pliny Natural History 2. 103.

The Mystery of the Doves

Doves were said to have had contact with the oracle from its beginning. But just what their function was, or if they were there at all has been a subject for debate for some time. The tradition of the doves belonging to Zeus begins with Homer, who says that the doves were the constant servants of Zeus. It was the doves who brought the ambrosia to Zeus as he was growing up on the island of Crete.

The doves are connected with the founding of the oracle as is shown in the stories mentioned in chapter two. If the existence of the doves can be explained away as symbolism in the story by Herodotus, is not it possible that they can also be explained away completely when more information comes to light? The doves were said to give oracles, but this tradition is recorded by historians only after the oracle had ceased to function and it mentions only that the doves "once" gave responses. One wonders whether the ancient writers, who were looking back, allowed themselves the luxury of speculating on what the role of the doves was.¹⁰ It has been conjectured that in pre-classical times the calling of the doves was interpreted, and Greek legend knows prophets who could understand

¹⁰W. R. Halliday, Greek Divination (London: Macmillan & Co., 1913), p. 266.

the talk of birds. One of these prophets was Mopsus, who was traditionally connected with Dodona and also a member of the Argo's crew.

The real cause for the question of the position of the doves comes from the word for dove itself. The Greek word for old women was peliai which also can refer to doves. So the question as to whether there were really doves is unanswered. The dove does have the most human-sounding call of any European bird and they often do roost in trees, but whether they were at Dodona or not is just speculation.¹¹ An inquirer arriving at the oracle was said to have been led to the tree by the Peliai (doves or women?) and then when the tree spoke they received their response.

The Priests of Dodona

From the beginning of the oracle there has been a priesthood of some sort. The first priests of the god at Dodona were the Selli who are described in the Iliad in an epithet that shows them as men who slept on the ground and never washed their feet.¹² The name Selli is probably derived from the designation of the light-god, who was worshipped

¹¹Parke, Zeus, pp. 65-67.

¹²Homer Iliad 16. 236.

in that territory.¹³ Just where these men came from has been open to debate. They could be the priests of the Pelasgians, which is the most prominent suggestion; or they could have come into the area at a later date, being part of the Indo-European migrations. At any rate, they are at the site of the oracle from its first mentioning in history.

Homer, who had a great deal of respect for the gods, clearly suggests that the people who lived about the sanctuary were barbarians, as shown by their mode of life.¹⁴ Certainly, the Greeks must have thought the rather un-Hellenic customs of the priests of the chief Hellenic god rather strange. It must have been rather hard for them to accept the manner of worshipping the king of the gods that the Selli set forth.

The domain of the Selli was the area enclosed by the grove of sacred oaks and the sacred spring. There is no mention as to whether the priests ever left the area nor is there any record as to why they stayed. If they were forced to reside there or if they voluntarily accepted the life of celibacy is not known, but arguing from silence, they do not appear to have wanted to leave the site.

One reason for the strange manner of life they followed would be that being close to the ground they would lose

¹³Duncker, Greece, p. 286.

¹⁴Ida Carleton Thallon, Readings in Greek History (New York: Ginn & Company, 1914), p. 55.

none of the emanations that came from the god, through the earth.

If this custom of contact with the earth is traced back far enough it will lead to a type of prophecy known as incubation which is not mentioned by any source concerning Dodona. Thus, speculation leads to the conclusion that these priests came from the great melting pot of Indo-Europeans because their spiritual contact with the gods was made by incubation. This then supports the theory that the priesthood, and even the god himself came from the north and is not native to the region.¹⁵ The custom of the Selli of refraining from washing their feet can have several meanings. They could have chosen to go without washing their feet to better receive the emanations of the god, or it could have a more symbolic meaning that they never left the area and so never became contaminated by the outside world and thus had no need of purification when they returned.¹⁶ Another explanation of the custom of unwashed feet is that they were barbarians living a coarse and nomadic life, and they did not wash their feet because they had not as yet changed from their primitive form of existence. At any rate, the answer to this riddle is probably lost to modern historians and will remain one of the unanswered questions about the oracle at Dodona.

¹⁵Parke, Zeus, p. 9.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 8.

It appears to have been the function of the priests to foretell the future in the flight of the doves and to listen to the voice of Zeus as he murmured in the rustlings of the leaves and the creaking of the branches. The priests also found messages from the god in the sound the wind made as it played among the bronze tripods about the temple area.¹⁷ However, all of these duties are arrived at by moderns looking back and not ancients writing them down as they observed them. The only ancient source enumerating the duties of the priests is Philostratus the Elder, who, in his Imagines gives the duties of the priests as:

One is charged with the hanging of the garlands,
One with uttering prayers to the invisible god,
a third must attend to the sacrificial cakes,
another to the barley grains and the baskets,
another makes the sacrifice,
another will permit no one else to flay the victim,
and another will interpret the will of Zeus.¹⁸

Thus, seven priests are mentioned and their duties outlined. This would indicate an active and specialized priesthood. Nothing of the mode of dress or of the training is known, but surely some form of novice stages must have been necessary. Even after the change to priestesses occurred there still seems to have been an important function for the priests. Until the end of the oracle the priests had the task of

¹⁷ Andre Saglio, "The Grove of Dodona," The Century Illustrated Magazine, October, 1906, p. 244.

¹⁸ Philostratus Imagines 2. 33.

answering the inquiries of the Boeotians. Why they retained this special position will be explained in chapter four. What is important here is that the priesthood remained until the end of the oracle in some manner. The end of the priests as principal officers of the god seems to have come about by the time of Herodotus, as in his writings he makes no mention of them but instead refers to the priestesses.¹⁹

The Priestesses of Dodona

The central figure at Greek oracles in the classical age was the priestess. Exactly how these women came to hold a monopoly on the mediumistic arts in Greece is no clearer than why they managed to maintain their lead. There is no conclusive evidence as to how they were chosen or what their qualifications had to be. Suffice it to say that when one priestess died there was probably available a younger woman whose "otherness" made her a likely candidate for the position.²⁰ The transition from priest to priestess was completed about the time that Dione was fully established as sharing the temple with Zeus. The Athenian, Euripides, indicated the importance of women at the oracular site when

¹⁹Herodotus Histories 2. 54-58.

²⁰Finley Hooper, Greek Realities (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), p. 83.

he said "At the holy seat of Dodona, beside the sacred oak, a woman conveys the will of Zeus to all Greeks who may desire it. So righteous is woman's part in holy service."²¹

Although Delphi is the prime example of the frenzied state of the priestess when she was giving her prophecy, Dodona also contributed to the trend. It should be understood that most of the oracular messages from Dodona were given by sign rather than by verbal prophecy so the frenzied status of the priestess was not as necessary as at Delphi. Still, some of our sources confirm that when the priestess was prophesying she was in a state of frenzy. Plato states in his Phaedrus, "It is to their madness that we owe the many benefits that the Pythia of Delphi and the priestess of Dodona were able to bestow upon Greece both privately and publicly, for when their minds were right their achievements amounted to little or nothing."²²

The Elder Philostratus mentions the duties of the priestesses. He states that they appear stiff and solemn and seem to breathe the odor of incense and libations. Their duties were to feed the god with offerings of food and to

²¹ Euripides Melanippe Captive 50. 8.

²² Plato Phaedrus 22. -

interpret the will of the invisible god.²³

The confession of faith

During the heyday of the oracle, the priests and priestesses established a confession of faith by which the supplicants would show their faith in the almighty god. It was originally recited by the head priestess but later records show that it was chanted by all who went to consult the oracle. The confession reads as follows:

Zeus was, Zeus is, and Zeus shall be.
O mighty Zeus! Earth yieldeth fruits,
Therefore ye name her Mother Earth.²⁴

The Dodonaean Gong

Next to the fabled oak, the most important feature of Dodona was the gong. The gong consisted of two pillars about four feet high and made of stone. On top of one pillar stood a small, bronze, naked statue of either a man or male child. In the right hand of the statue was a bronze whip with three lashes, wrought in chain fashion and tipped with bone. The second pillar supported a small bronze vessel around which the lashes of the whip hung in

²³Philostratus Imagines 2. 33.

²⁴Thaddeus Zielinski, The Religion of Ancient Greece (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 32.

such a manner that when the wind blew, the bone tips beat against the sides of the vessel producing a ringing tone. Excavation at Dodona has recovered part of a pillar which presumably was that on which the statue stood. A fragmentary inscription shows this to be a dedication of the Corcyraeans dating back to 639 B.C. and is the oldest identifiable dedication at the oracle.²⁵

This, then, was the fabled gong of Dodona. Or was it? There are several historical references to a unique power of this gong which have considerably clouded the issue. These references, and an old proverb, refer to the ringing properties of the gong. According to legend, the gong at Dodona, when struck, would ring all day unless it was stilled.²⁶ Another version tells that from beginning to end, the sound of the tone would last the space of time a man would need to count to 400.²⁷ The fame of the Dodonaean gong grew until a proverb concerning it evolved. The proverb concerns any woman that talks excessively, and states that, "to stop the gong at Dodona, which they say sounds all day if a passer-by lays a finger on it, would be easier than to

²⁵Parke, Zeus, p. 88; Lempriere's Classical Dictionary (1958), p. 12.

²⁶Parke, Zeus, p. 87.

²⁷Strabo Geography 7. 3.

stop her tongue, for it sounds all night as well."²⁸

It is hard to imagine any single vessel ringing continually for approximately five minutes (the space of time needed to count to four hundred) without being struck several times. The answer to this dilemma, as A. B. Cook suggests, is that it was not one gong, but a series of gongs.²⁸ As has been mentioned earlier, worship at Dodona stemmed from early nature worship. In worshipping the elements of nature, there was no need for any permanent building to contain the holy relics of the god. Instead, at Dodona, the sacred tree was enclosed by a ring of bronze or copper vessels which had been dedicated by people wishing to petition the god.

These vessels were placed side by side so that they would touch one another and in this manner form a ring around the tree. The vessels hung from a tripod arrangement, thus giving them freedom of movement to vibrate which they would not have had if they sat on the ground. If the series of tripods really served in place of a wall around the sacred oak, a space would be left for an entrance and it would be natural for the visitor to touch one or the other of the two tripods to the right or left of the entrance as he passed through. The particular tripod thus touched occasioned the

²⁸ A. B. Cook, "The Gong at Dodona," Journal of Hellenic Studies, XXII (1902), 5.

whole sequence of echoes and might fairly be described as a gong.²⁹ Modern science has conjectured that if the vessels were of equal dimensions, or if variation in size was balanced by variation in thickness, a note of the same pitch could be propagated from vessel A to B and from B to C et cetera. Therefore, the accuracy of the information concerning the time of the pitch or ringing need not be called into question.³⁰

Excavations at Dodona have produced finds that would support both the single gong and the tripod theory. It would appear that the solution would be a combination of the two.³¹ The first vessels were probably placed in the sanctuary area by the priests and were later replaced by the Corcyraean gong. In time, as more people felt the urge to offer something to the god, the system of tripods was resumed until a complete ring of vessels surrounded the oak by the middle of the classical period.

Just exactly what the function of the many tripods and vessels, which are said to have been at the oracle, was is not known. No historical writings explain their

²⁹Cook, "Gong at Dodona," p. 5.

³⁰Ibid., p. 7.

³¹Ibid., p. 28.

purpose, yet there must have been one. Nothing at the sanctuary itself presents a clue, but the vessels themselves do. What is the clue? The bronze of which the vessels are made!

Throughout the ancient world, before the rise of high cultures, bronze played a magical role. Nothing was regarded as a purer substance and more powerful an agent in frightening off evil spirits than bronze.³² With this thought in mind, and also remembering that religious practices at Dodona came from early, primitive, beginnings, the function of the bronze vessels becomes clear. From its very inception the Dodonaean gong was a purification instrument of the most potent kind. The sound of bronze that echoed around the sacred precinct served to scare away any and all evil spirits. At first the whole series of tripods, and subsequently the child statue and vessel, kept up a continuous clang which was a potent means of averting evil.³³ The use of bronze in frightening off evil forces goes further than just the statue and tripods. Record has been found of bronze vessels being suspended from the branches of the sacred oak from

³² Cook, "Gong at Dodona," p. 5.

³³ Ibid., p. 20.

where they blew and banged against each other to frighten off the spirits.³⁴

At Dodona, the bronze vessels were not in themselves oracular devices. Zeus was the god of thunder, and the metallic clang was to human ears the closest sound to thunder. No doubt the bone-tipped lashes beating on the cauldron were meant by the Corcyraeans both to protect the sanctuary and to please the god who dwelt there. These would have been sufficient functions for it to perform without also being expected to speak oracles.³⁵

The only question remaining unanswered is why were the statue and vessel placed on a pair of short pillars? Given a moment's thought the answer is obvious. By elevating the gong it would be out of harm's way and the sound of the gong would be clearly heard.

It should be mentioned that there is a reference to the use of the vessels as a means of oracular response. However, this record is not found until the writings of Clement of Alexandria who said: "...the mouth of caverns full of sorcery or the cauldrons of Thesprotia, or the Cirrhean tripods, or the Dodonaean bronze vessels, are

³⁴Graves, Greek Myths, p. 178.

³⁵Parke, Zeus, pp. 90-91.

all godless instruments of pagan oracles."³⁶ This reference may, however, be fairly well dispensed with because Clement wrote well after the fall of the oracle and could only guess what the function of the vessels might have been.

Boiling water

There is one other reference to the use of the bronze vessels at Dodona. A large cauldron of hot water stood before the priestess as she gave her oracular responses. The evidence points to a custom which is found among many ancient peoples concerning sanctioned dismemberment of bodies, alive or dead, originating in a superstition, somehow connected with resurrection, as in the case of Osiris the Egyptian.³⁷ The spectacle of a priest or priestess performing the ceremony of boiling him or herself, seeming to do so, or even symbolizing it was impressive to those outside the temple mysteries, especially as they came for the express purpose of being impressed.

In classical literature the reference to reincarnation through the use of boiling water is found in the story of the Golden Fleece. In the story, Jason wishes Medea to restore youth to his father, Aeson. Medea, by using certain magic

³⁶ Clement of Alexandria Exhortation to the Greeks 2. 1.

³⁷ Stratton, Dodona, p. vi.

spells and charms, performs Jason's wish. At this point the daughters of Pelias approach Medea to ask the same favor for their father. Medea pretended to consent and prepared her cauldron as before. At her request an old ram was brought to her. She killed it and plunged it into the cauldron. Shortly, a bleating was heard in the cauldron and when the cover was removed a young lamb jumped forth and ran away across the meadow. The daughters were impressed and wished to hurry and complete the spell for their father. Medea pretended to prepare her cauldron as before but neglected to add certain herbs. She then persuaded the daughters to kill their father after which she vanished and left him dead at the hands of his daughters. It is this same wish for reincarnation, for regained youth, that the seeming boiling of the priest or priestess at Dodona is to symbolize.

Physical Structures at Dodona

The last part of the physical attributes of the oracle are the buildings themselves. These have been purposely left to the end because they were the last things to appear on the site. It is curious that a temple of Zeus has not been found at Dodona prior to the fourth century, and it is plausibly suggested that in the fifth and sixth centuries there may have been nothing more than the altar surrounded

by tripods.³⁸

Dr. Evangelides uncovered the only permanent structure known to have existed at Dodona. His find consisted of the remains of the foundation of a temple to Zeus under a modern Christian basilica.³⁹

There are some very plausible reasons for this lack of buildings at Dodona. Zeus was originally a very primitive and, it must be admitted, quite an un-Hellenic character. The priests, who are referred to as sleeping on the ground and going without washing their feet, are not at all like the other priests of Hellenic deities. Even Zeus himself failed to take on a particular classical form until a later date; his manifestation was the oak tree; perhaps he even lived in the tree.⁴⁰ The use of natural signs and methods to produce the oracular responses would not require the use of a temple as such. It would be rather hard to enclose an entire grove of sacred oaks together with the accompanying springs and wells within a single temple. About the only necessity would be a wall or fence to mark the boundaries

³⁸H. G. G. Payne, "Black Figured Fragments," Journal of Hellenic Studies, L (1929), 242.

³⁹Parke, Zeus, p. 114.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 115.

of the sacred shrine and preserve the natural atmosphere of the site.

As time passed, and the classical era advanced, the Greeks began to build magnificent temples throughout the land. Dodona was then forced to keep pace if the oracle was not to lose out. This fact, together with the by now extreme age of the tree, and its probable state of decay, would create a need for a building of some kind. This also is the time for the shifting to divination by lot and so would be a natural time for beginning new practices of worship.

The Selli, who sleep on the ground, may be content to have no permanent roof. The oak and the doves, if they were the original sources of prophecy, would have functioned in the open air. Even the procedures of inquiry by lot would not, in the Greek climate, need a building. The priestess may have used a table set up under the tree itself.⁴¹ As the classical influence grew stronger, the need was felt for a statue of Zeus, and thus a building, however small, to house it. This need was satisfied by the construction in approximately 450 B.C. of a small temple which the best possible measurements show to have been about twenty-two feet

⁴¹Parke, Zeus, p. 116.

by fifteen feet.⁴² Accurate measurement is difficult because the temple ruins are located under a modern church which can hardly be moved.

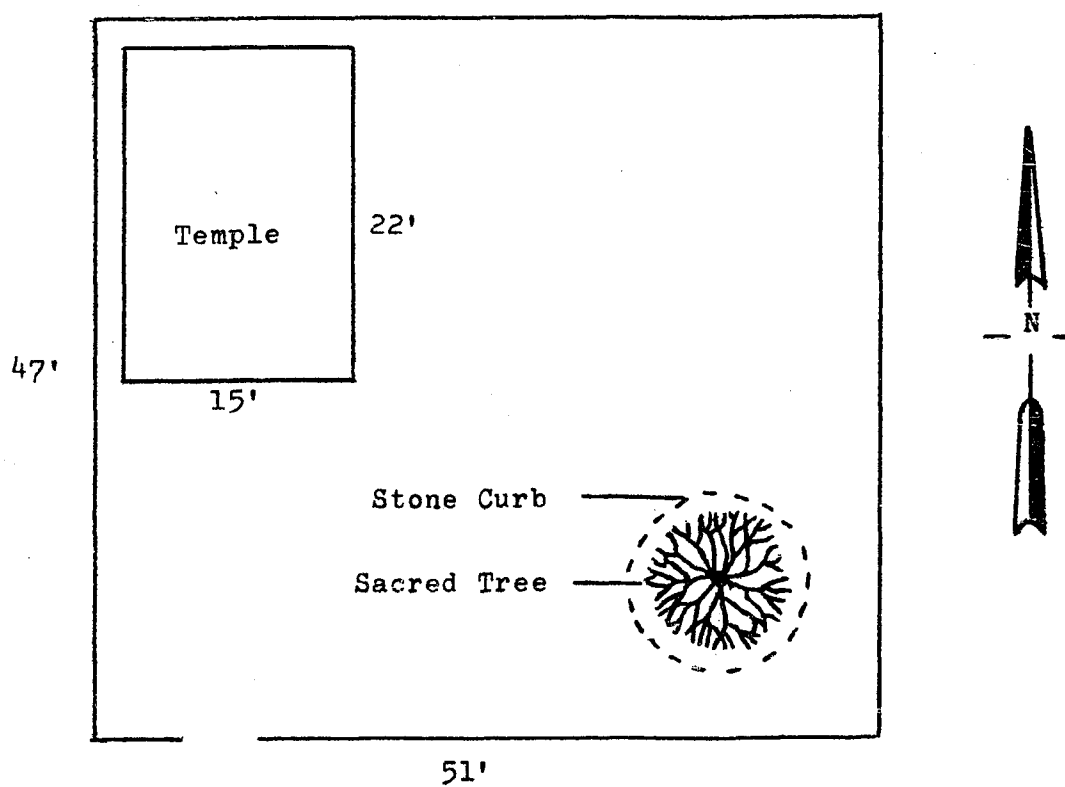
In the third quarter of the fourth century, a low circuit wall of isodomic masonry was attached to the temple so as to create an oblong court in front of it. This precinct measured fifty-one by forty-seven feet and had its longest dimension at right angles to the temple and an entrance on the south side facing the building. But the curious feature of the arrangement was that the precinct was not sited symmetrically in front of the temple. Its wall ran close to the line of the west wall of the temple leaving a large area on the east side vacant. It is in this southeast corner that Evangelides found archaeological fragments which may have belonged to an altar and finds which suggested a series of dedications. Hence, he concluded that this was the spot where the oak of Zeus had stood. The oak may have been surrounded with a stone curb and also have been the center of a concentration of offerings. That no more precisely identifiable remains were found is explained by the Christian zealots who vigorously attacked the oracle. The ground shows signs of having been disturbed and probably even the roots were dug up and destroyed. The hypothesis

⁴²Hammond, Epirus, p. 508.

that the tree was situated in this corner would also explain the curious relation of the court to the temple. It was designed to enclose both the temple and oak even at the sacrifice of symmetry.⁴³

⁴³Parke, Zeus, pp. 117-18.

The Sanctuary at Dodona



Scale: 1/16 inch equals 1 foot

CHAPTER FOUR

The Homelands of the Petitioners

Even a cursory study of the oracle at Dodona will reveal that it was both popular and often used. The evidence pointing to this conclusion is found in the great number of lead writing tablets which have been uncovered at Dodona. It is from these tablets that most of the information concerning the consultation of the oracle is derived. A detailed discussion of these tablets follows, but first, let us turn our attention to the people who used the oracle.

At Dodona, it appears to have been the custom for the petitioner to identify himself before addressing his question to the god. Historians are deeply indebted to this custom, for it has provided considerable information concerning the people who used the oracle. As has been mentioned earlier, Zeus at Dodona seems to have been more concerned with the "man on the street," as opposed to Apollo at Delphi who preferred to deal with kings and states. A number of states did petition, and receive advice, from Zeus, but none of these petitions date before the last quarter of the fifth century.¹ Again, it should be made clear

¹Parke, Oracles, p. 92.

that the record of the petitions to the gods at Dodona is only as complete as the tablets recovered. What was asked of the gods before the use of the tablets is known only through legend, and can not be substantiated. Judging from the form of dialect and writing on the tablets it would appear that the majority of the petitioners at Dodona were from west Greece and the Peloponnese.² Indeed, this would be only logical, those people who lived closest to the sanctuary would naturally be evidenced in greater numbers than those who would have to travel a great distance to get there. Yet the fact that there are a number of petitions from people who, by the location of their homeland, had to travel a great distance tends to show that the fame of the oracle was indeed great. From the inscriptions on the lead tablets, a list has been compiled of the various tribes, cities, and geographical locations from which petitioners came to consult the oracle. Following this list is a map identifying the homelands of the oracle's petitioners.

²Parke, Oracles, p. 92.

1. Acarnania

The area known as Acarnania is in northwest Greece, bounded by the Ionian Sea, the Gulf of Ambracia and the river Achelous. With Athenian help, the Acarnanians beat off the attacks from Cornith and Sparta which occurred in 437-426 B.C. After the end of the Pelponnesian War they were finally defeated by the Spartan Agesilaus in 390 B.C.³

2. Aetolia

To the west of Mount Oxya lies the land of Aetolia. It is a country bordered on the west by the lower and middle valley of the River Achelous.⁴

3. Ambracia

The city of Ambracia was founded as a colony of Cornith. It is located in southern Epirus on the Abrachthos River.⁵

4. Athens

The jewel of the Attic peninsula, Athens, was founded

³Oxford Classical Dictionary, p. 1.

⁴Ibid., p. 17.

⁵Ibid., p. 42.

about 1556 B.C. Throughout most of antiquity the city was the cultural center of the world.⁶

5. Boeotia

The area known as Boeotia comprises a district of central Greece extending south to the Corinthian Gulf and north to the limits of the plains of Orchomenus and Thebes. This particular area was very much in contact with the oracle; in fact, envoys from somewhere in Boeotia were solely responsible for the retaining of the Selli as priests at the oracle.⁷

6. Chaones

Chaones is one of the fourteen Epirote tribes, probably of Dorian and Illyrian stock, that inhabited the plain of Buthrotum.⁸

7. Corcyra

Located in northwest Greece, Corcyra is one of the most important of the Ionian islands. It is located

⁶Oxford Classical Dictionary, p. 114.

⁷Ibid., p. 139.

⁸Ibid., p. 332.

at the starting point of two main Greek trade routes: along the coast of Illyria, and across the Adriatic to Italy and Sicily. Corcyra was a land torn by constant civil strife and also figured prominently in the cause for the Peloponnesian War.⁹

8. Corinth

The isthmus city, Corinth, controlled communications between northern Greece and the Peloponnesus. The city lay two to three miles north of the sea.¹⁰

9. Epirus

The home of the oracle, Epirus, is located in northwestern Greece along the Ionian Sea just to the east of the island of Corcyra. A city also called Epirus is often referred to in historical literature but the exact location of a city by this name has not been found.¹¹

10. Hyperboreans

Little is known about the actual existence of these

⁹Oxford Classical Dictionary, p. 234.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 235.

¹¹Ibid., p. 332.

people. They are assumed to have been a semi-legendary race of Apollo-worshippers living in the far north of Greece. There are only a few clues given to show that they may have actually existed, and some of these come from the lead tablets at Dodona. Herodotus relates that the Hyperboreans sent offerings to Zeus at Dodona and that some of the ambassadors sent never returned, suggesting that they were coldly treated by the god.¹²

11. Molossi

One of the fourteen Epirote tribes, probably of Dorian and Illyrian stock, were the Molossi who inhabited the plain near and around Dodona. It is this tribe that, in the late fourth century B.C., led in the unification of Epirus.¹³

12. Oricum

Established as a colony of Colchi, Oricum was a small town in Epirus along the coast of the Ionian Sea. There

¹² Oxford Classical Dictionary, p. 444; Le Marchant, Greek Religion, p. 77.

¹³ Oxford Classical Dictionary, p. 332.

is little known about the city except that it was often referred to as Dardania.¹⁴

13. Pelasgians

The Pelasgians were said to be the most ancient people that were sovereigns in Greece. They were probably North-Aegean people uprooted by Bronze Age migrations and forced down into Epirus. They are generally thought to have inhabited the area around Dodona before the early migrations were completed.¹⁵

14. Rhodes

An island off the Turkish coast in the Mediterranean Sea, Rhodes was the center of the trade routes between Egyptian and Phoenician ports and those of Greece. The island was settled by the Dorians.¹⁶

15. Sparta

The principal city of the Peloponnesus, Sparta, was

¹⁴Lempriere's Classical Dictionary, p. 428

¹⁵Thallon, Readings, p. 55.

¹⁶"Rhodes," The Praeger Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek Civilization (1967), p. 394.

located in the southern half of the peninsula. Sparta did not begin petitioning the oracle until a later date but once she began she was one of the last states to cease contact at the shrine.¹⁷

16. Tarentum

A city in the heel of the Italian boot, Tarentum was founded as a colony of Sparta around 700 B.C.¹⁸

17. Thessalia

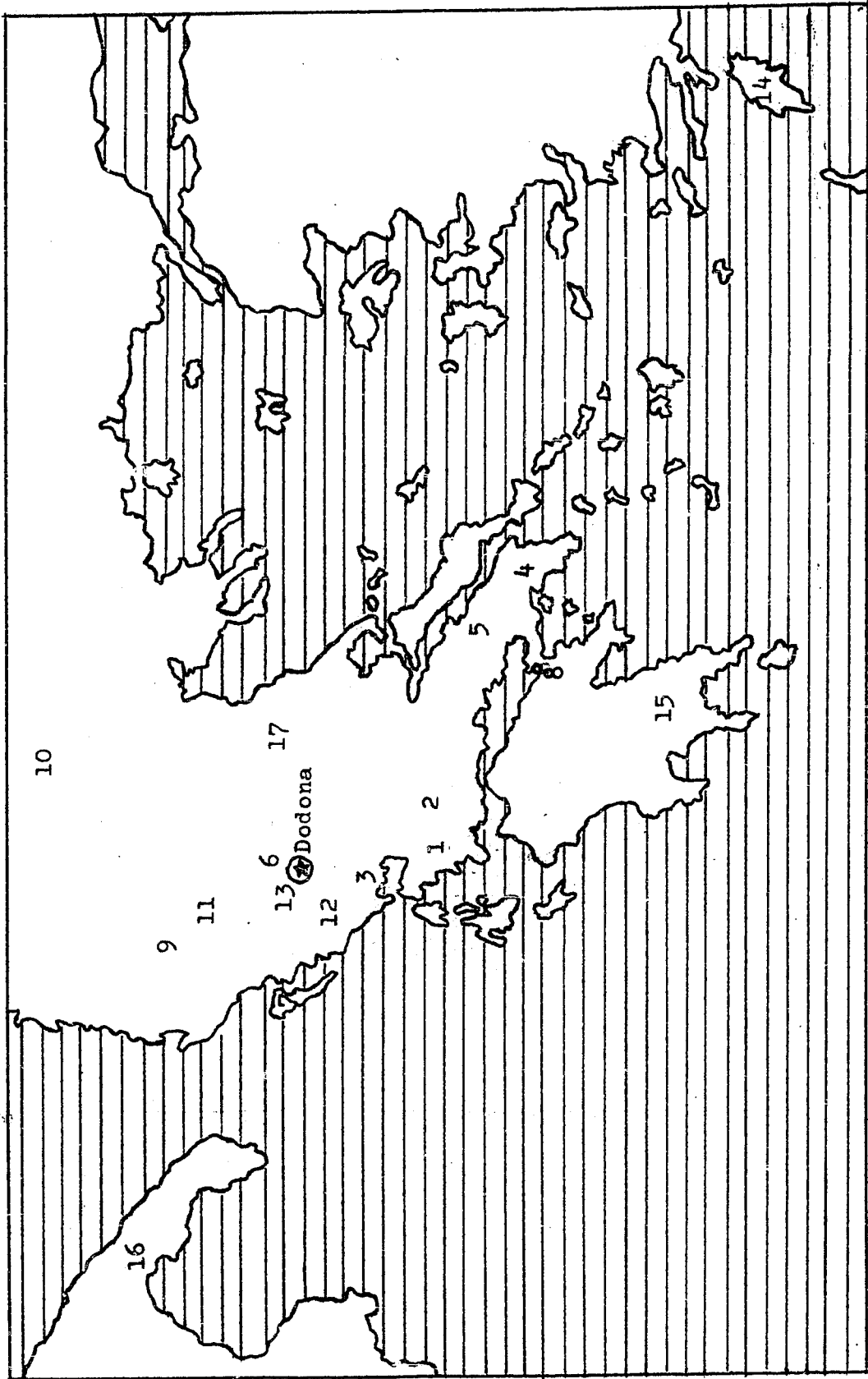
The state of Thessalia is hard to identify because its boundaries were under constant change. During the classical period the borders of Thessalia were generally thought to be: the northern edge of mainland Greece, the southern border of Macedonia, the Aegean Sea, and the eastern border of ~~Illyricum~~. The people were said to be crafty and treacherous, so much so, that the Greeks referred to counterfeit or clipped money as Thessalian coin.¹⁹

¹⁷Oxford Classical Dictionary, p. 855.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 878.

¹⁹Lempriere's Classical Dictionary, p. 626.

The identifying numbers on the map correspond to the numbers on the preceding list.



Methods of Answering the Petitions

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the oracles given by the king of the gods was that they were, almost always, given by sign. Strabo relates that Zeus spoke not by words but by means of certain tokens.²⁰ At Dodona it is the article itself that gave the answers, where other oracles used a personification of the god to do the job.

When the oracle switched to the system of lottery, which involved the lead tablets, the questions written on them were phrased so as to need only a single word or sign for an answer. Delphi, on the other hand, when it switched to lottery still relied on the elaborate verbal answers of the Pythia.²¹

It is assumed that in the beginning of the oracle's history each suppliant made his appeal directly to, and received his response directly from, the oak of Zeus; there was no intermediary. However, until the use of lottery began in the sixth century, little is known of the actual methods by which the god was questioned and answered his

²⁰Strabo Geography 7. 11.

²¹Parke, Oracles, p. 17.

petitioners.²² A list of five possible methods of oracular response read as follows:

1. through the rustlings of the leaves
2. by the flight of doves
3. the fall of dice
4. the sound made by the ringing of the cauldron
5. the system of lots²³

The validity of these five methods may be summed up as follows: the oak is said to "speak" and not rustle; the doves have not been proven to have been at the oracle; the dice are referred to in only one source, and then only through a listing of oracular methods used at ancient oracles and not specifically at Dodona; the sound of the ringing cauldron is a possibility since cauldrons were present, but in the previous chapter it has been shown that the bronze vessels seem to have had another purpose; and the system of lottery can be confirmed because of the archaeological finds that have been made.

It is known that the oracle at Dodona was functioning on a high level before the sixth century when the lead tablets first began to be used. How, then, did the oracle prophesy? For an answer we can only look to the ancient

²²Stratton, Dodona, p. 57.

²³Praeger Encyclopedia, p. 168.

sources and repeat their answer: the oak spoke. This leaves a rather unscientific taste in one's mouth. How did the oak speak? All that is known is that the Selli were said to have been able to interpret the sounds of the tree as the words of Zeus. There is no evidence as to what kind of sound the tree made. Nor do we know if the words of the Selli were composed into discursive statements or whether, as the Odyssey suggests, the question which Zeus was to answer was a simple alternative, and all the Selli needed to say was that the god has shown his approval of one proposition and rejection of another.²⁴ It is difficult to know whether the priests had to wait for the signs to show themselves, or whether there was some manner by which they could aid these signs in occurring. Today we know that Zeus could not have actually spoken, because he did not exist. Yet there is repeated reference in historical literature to the speaking oak of Dodona. The only manner in which the oak could "speak" would be the petitioner's overactive imagination, or the natural noises that a tree makes due to the play of the wind through its branches. Since Dodona was a windy place,

²⁴Parke, Oracles, p. 24.

the tree would have been able frequently to "speak" and thus answer its petitioners.²⁵

W. H. Parke has uncovered two traits of the oracle by which the god made his will known to the visitor. If a passer-by produced a long series of echoes from the cauldron fence, he might take it that the god was smiling on him and was favorable to his approach. Again, if a visitor was greeted by the statue with a long series of buffets on the bronze vessel, he might safely assume that this was a favorable indication. Neither of these omens was accepted by the priests or priestesses as one of their official methods of producing responses, but rather they grew up as customs among those who petitioned the god.²⁶

The System of Cleromancy

Near the close of the sixth, or the beginning of the fifth century, Dodona shifted to the system of giving oracular responses by lot, or cleromancy. Before this time, the methods of prophecy are only vague and uncertain, but once cleromancy begins, part of the cloud that hangs over the ancient oracle is cleared. This is not to say

²⁵Parke, Oracles, p. 24.

²⁶Parke, Zeus, p. 90.

that all is clear, for mystery still surrounds the oracle today, but at least now there is a basis from which to begin a study of the oracle of Zeus.

The Greek believed in a kind of fatalism which he called moira. Moira is essentially amoral and beyond human logic; Homer even placed it above the gods. The symbol for moira is the lottery, for in lottery there is good and bad, and even Zeus can do no better than drawing if he is to be fair and distribute men's share of luck and misfortune without fear or favor.²⁷

As Dodona began to shift to cleromancy it gradually became popular as a part of the oracular rites. Why the oracle changed to cleromancy is unknown, but there may be a practical reason behind it. As has been already suggested, the final decay and death of the great oak would create a need for some new methods of response from the god. Undoubtedly several methods were tried in an attempt to find one which would be acceptable to the petitioners. Whatever the reason, historians should be grateful that cleromancy was chosen because this system alone is responsible for most of our information concerning the oracular practices at Dodona.

²⁷Lewinsohn, Science, Prophecy and Prediction, p. 69.

There are several possible instruments which could have been used for the lots, but exactly which one was used is not known. Dice, knucklebones, beans, bits of bread, stones and even chips of wood are all possible instruments of lottery.

The use of the lead writing tablets at Dodona has had the effect of making Dodona unique as an oracle-center. It is the only oracle from which we possess the evidence of a considerable number of inquiries. The tablets of Dodona are frequently difficult to read, and are often broken and incomplete, but at least they are authentic!²⁸ Although Delphi also used cleromancy, no complete record, such as at Dodona, remains and the references that are found in historical literature may have been changed or edited to suit the writer's purpose. This is not the case at Dodona. Excavation and archaeological dating techniques have uncovered a great number of tablets dating from the late fourth century B.C., about the time Herodotus is reported to have visited the oracle. There continues to be a considerable number of tablets down to about 200 B.C. after which time no further tablets have been recovered.

²⁸Parke, Zeus, p. 257.

It was undoubtedly the duty of one of the priests to prepare the lead tablets for oracular usage. The lead was cast into large flat sheets which were then cut in squares or oblong shapes, rather like ribbons. The typical tablet was three inches long by one inch wide and buffed smooth on one side.²⁹

The tablets were distributed by the priests to the individual petitioner who wrote the question himself. The question was written with a stylus on one side of the tablet in two to four lines always running the length of the tablet and never carrying over onto the reverse side. After the question had been incised on the tablet it was then folded so that the writing was hidden on the inside. Each tablet was folded into quarters using two folds. The thin lead strips were evidently folded for two purposes. Their small size made it possible to insert them and extract them from a jar, and the priestess could not determine the contents of the inquiry by human intellect.³⁰ After folding, a number, an abbreviated name, or some similar identification was etched on the outside so that it could be recognized later without unfolding. The written question

²⁹Parke, Zeus, p. 101.

³⁰Parke, Oracles, p. 92.

was then put into some vessel with a narrow neck from which the priestess extracted it during the ceremony, probably at the same time as she drew out a bean or some other object from another jar. The replies, favorable and unfavorable, as well as the names of the gods, goddesses and heroes to whom the petitioner was to pray and offer sacrifices, may have been written on similar strips of lead and drawn from jars. Then, without reading the question, the priestess used the serial number or abbreviation on the tablet to reply that "the god's answer to Callias is favorable and he should pray to Achelous," or "the god's answer to the fifth question is unfavorable."³¹ If the answers were written on strips of lead, these were probably returned to the petitioner as souvenirs of his visit to the oracle. On the other hand, if the answers were oral, the purpose of writing the questions could be to add an elaborate front to the whole process. Still another solution is that the answers, negative and affirmative, as well as the god's names, were carved on chips of wood which could have been cut from the tree and in this manner the tree would still be regarded as "speaking."³²

³¹Parke, Zeus, p. 108.

³²Ibid., p. 111.

Since a great many of the tablets found have been folded, it is assumed that this is the condition in which they were left after the oracle had delivered its message. There is evidence that the strips were retained and used over and over again because careful observation can detect several layers of writing on each strip. Thus, the opinion is held that they were not handed back to the inquirer and that the answer was given to the petitioner in some other manner.

Archaeology has recovered and estimated 200 tablets from the sanctuary at Dodona, and of these only about fifty are intact or readable. The remaining tablets are so broken and mutilated that any attempt to translate them would be wasted, for they would still offer no new light.

Carapanos found a number of these tablets before the turn of the century and his finds are in the National Museum in Athens. However, they have greatly suffered from deterioration of the surface and it is impossible to further check the readings. He found inscriptions and fragments of inscriptions on leather, bronze, copper and lead. Among these are decrees of the Assembly of the Epirotes issued during the reign of Eacides. His works also included certain franchises, sales contracts, enfranchisements of slaves, and the like. All these acts had been deposited in the temple of Zeus Naios conforming to the custom

generally practiced by the Hellenes of giving to their contracts more publicity by making a deposit of them in a temple and thereby investing them with a sacred character which rendered their execution more certain.³³

Those tablets found by Evangelides in the thirties are in the Museum of Jannina and are still well preserved. They include a fourth-century dedication to Zeus Naios and forty-three texts, many of which are seriously mutilated, and date from the fifth or fourth century B.C. All, save three of the texts, are on plates of bronze or lead, the others being on copper and leather. The majority of the questions seem to center around the themes of marriage, children, home or property, business and health.³⁴

The inscriptions found at Dodona throw an interesting light on the function of the Greek oracle and the confidential relationship between the Greek and his deity. Most of the questions are worded in the third person, although all of them are not in what would be the equivalent of the King's English. Out of the fifty inquiries which are preserved and can be read, only nine are from cities or states, as private individuals make up the bulk of the questions. Many of these individuals do not state their

³³Stratton, Dodona, p. 11.

³⁴H. G. G. Payne, "Archaeology Report," Journal of Hellenic Studies, LVII (1937), 190.

homeland, probably because they came from the area and thus did not feel the need to identify themselves with the god whom they regarded as their neighbor. Several of the petitioners identify themselves as Athenian, Ambrociote or such, while the homelands of the other petitioners are identified by the form of alphabet or dialect which they used. The petitioners were nearly always men, but occasionally a wife was associated with her husband and at least one woman inquired alone.

The private individuals who consulted Zeus were concerned with all manner of everyday queries. The stock questions seem to be whether to get married, to venture on a business voyage, or to undertake some task or mission. The subjects of the petitions were thus small matters, and reflect the attitudes and concerns of the average man in the ancient world. After only a glance, it is easy to see that the petitioners were often concerned with the same matters which bother men today: health, love, business, children and security. Thus modern man may not be so different from his ancient brother after all!

The oracle was also consulted on religious matters. The lead tablets recovered frequently ask the question what god, goddess or hero should be invoked for aid to

solve a particular problem.³⁵ Zeus and Dione were not always consulted for advice but at times to merely give their blessing to a project which had already been begun.

One interesting note is the matter of the questions themselves. Many of the questions reflect a veiled or hidden probe to the god. It is almost as if the questioner does not want the god to really know exactly what it is he is up to and so he beats around the proverbial bush. How similar is this to the modern conception of prayer in which a man prays for something without really identifying what it is he is asking for? If anything, there is one fact that rings clearly throughout the questions—man is in trouble and is searching for an answer to his needs and a source to which he can go for help.

Petitions From Greek States

Out of the forty tablets which have been recovered intact, only nine deal with the petitions of states. The following translations depict the poor grammatical construction used by the ancient Greeks:

1. From the tribe of Chaones.

Dated from the late fourth century B.C.

³⁵Arthur Fairbanks, Handbook of Greek Religion (Chicago: American Book Company, 1910), p. 87.

"Good fortune. The city of the Chaones requests Zeus Naios and Dione to answer if it is better or more good and more expedient that they transfer the building of the temple of Athena, the city Goddess."

Apparently the Chaones had previously received a favorable response permitting them to build a temple on a particular site and now they wished to change the location. Since the god had sanctioned the previous site they felt that he would have to sanction the move also.

2. From the Corcyraeans.

Dated between 450-404 B.C.

"God. The Corcyraeans inquire of Zeus Naios and Dione, to what god or hero by making sacrifice and prayer they may dwell in the fairest and best way both now and in time to come."

3. From the Dodonaeans.

This has not been dated.

"The Dodonaeans ask Zeus and Dione whether it is on account of the impurity of some human being that god sends the storm."

It would seem that the Dodonaeans feel familiar enough with the god of the oracle to omit the use of the cult name Naios when addressing him.

4. From the Mondaeanes.

This has not been dated.

"The community of the Mondaeanes inquires of Zeus Naios and Dione concerning the money of Themis whether it is permissible and better to put it on loan for Themis."

This would seem to be an inquiry concerning the matter of using the money of the sacred treasury for some civil purpose.

5. From the Corcyraeans and the Oricians.

This has not been dated.

"God. The Corcyraeans and the Oricians inquire of Zeus Naios and Dione by making sacrifice and prayer to what god or hero they may dwell in the fairest and safest way and good and plentiful fruits may thrive for them and enjoyment of every fine fruit."

This is one of the few petitions found in which more than one person or state combine in an attempt to speak to the god.

6. From an unknown state of Epirus.

This has not been dated.

"The community of the...ask Zeus Naios and Dione whether...if they join the federation with the Molossi it will be safe for them."

Although no professional historian has attempted a date for this particular petition, it would appear to be from the period of time in which Alexander I of Molossi was attempting to unify the state of Epirus, 342-330 B.C.

7. From the city of Tarentum.

Dated from the end of the fourth century B.C.

"To the gods. With good fortune. The city of Tarentum asks Zeus Naios and Dione concerning all good fortune and concerning..."

Although this petition is largely fragmentary it is the only petition recovered thus far from Tarentum. It is important because it sheds light on the distance people would travel to consult the oracle.

8. From an unknown tribe or city in Epirus.

This has not been dated.

"...ask how they can best guarantee their security if allied with the Molossians."

This petition would again seem to come from during the reign of Alexander I who tried to unify Epirus.

9. From the arbitrators of an unknown city.

This has been dated to the fourth century.

"The arbitrators ask Zeus Naios and Dione whether if they spend the...money on the council chamber which he has justly recovered from the city it will be better and more good for them."

Answer: (?)

"To the arbitrators. Justly spend this on the council chamber."³⁶

This is one of the petitions involved in the controversy over written answers at Dodona. To this particular petition there is an apparent answer, but it seems to be rather specific an answer if the priestess

³⁶ These petitions are found in the following sources: Farnell, Greek States, Vol. I, p. 40; Parke, Zeus, pp. 259-62; Stratton, Dodona, p. iv.

was not able to open and read the folded tablet.

Petitions From Individuals

The petitions of private individuals make up the bulk of the tablets found at the oracle. Thirty-nine such petitions have been found in some degree of legibility; while some of these are self-explanatory, others are fragmentary or may need some explanation. Again, the following translations will reveal the faulty grammar of the people:

General petitions

1. Inquirer unknown.

This has not been dated.

"...is it better or more advantageous to occupy my town or country house..."

2. Inquirer unknown.

This has not been dated.

"...to which god or hero by making sacrifice may it be better or more good..."

Petitions concerning the family

1. From Diognetus, the son of Aristomedes, of Athens.

This has not been dated.

"God. Good fortune. O lord and master, Zeus Naios and Dione, and Dodonaeans, Diognetus, the son of Aristomedes, of Athens, asks and supplicates to give to him and to all who are well disposed to him and to his mother Clearete and..."

2. From Evandros and his wife.

This has not been dated.

"Gods. Good Fortune. Evandros and his wife inquire of Zeus Naios and Dione by praying and sacrificing to what of the gods or heroes or supernatural powers they may fare better and more well themselves and their household both now and for all time."

3. From Lykkidas.

This has not been dated.

"...the guardianship will be fortunate to me which I Lykkidas have by marrying."

Apparently Lykkidas was marrying a female relative and undertaking the guardianship of her property.

4. From Gerioton.

This has not been dated.

"God. Gerioton asks Zeus concerning a wife, whether it is better for him to take one."

5. From Lysanias.

This has not been dated.

"God. Lysanias asks if he is the father of the child his wife Nyla is soon to bear."

6. From an unknown husband.

This has not been dated.

"...asks Zeus Naios and Dione if the child which Annyla is bearing is mine."

This same type of question appears to have been asked on a great number of the fragmentary tablets which have been found at the oracle. Apparently, men worried about this question as much in the ancient world as they do in the modern.

7. From Hercliedas.

This has not been dated.

"Hercliedas asks Zeus and Dione good fortune, and inquires of the god concerning a child, if he is to have one by Aigle his present wife."

8. From an unknown father or mother.

This has not been dated.

"God. ...asks if it would be advantageous to do... for the child."

Although largely fragmentary, this petition has been included because it shows another type of petition asked, that is, one requesting aid for another person.

9. From a concerned family man.

This has not been dated.

"...prays Zeus and Dione to accord success to him and his people, and that I may have other children besides my daughter Egle."

10. From Anaxippus.

This has not been dated.

"God. Good fortune. Anaxippus asks Zeus Naios and Dione concerning male offspring from Philista his wife, by praying to what of the gods shall I fare better and most well."

A translator's note declares that in this petition the spelling and grammar are irregular. Would this point to the use of the oracle by other than the highly educated? Perhaps the poor less educated man also took his problems to the god of the Oak.

Petitions concerning health

1. From Nicocrateia.

This has not been dated.

"Nicocrateia says to which of the gods she had better and more advantageously offer sacrifice that the illness may cease."

This petition shows that the god was also petitioned by women and not just by men. Again this would tend to show the use of the oracle by all classes of people.

2. From an unknown petitioner.

This has not been dated.

"...to what god or goddess is it more better to pray and make sacrifice to be cured of the illness."

3. From Thrasyboulos.

This has not been dated.

"...Thrasyboulos by sacrificing and appeasing which god will he become healthier as to his eyes."

4. From Leontios.

This has been dated to the fifth century.

"God. Luck. Leontios consults concerning his son Leon whether there will be recovery from the disease on his breast which seizes him."

5. From an Ambracian.

This has not been dated.

"...es of Ambracia...Zeus Naios and Dione concerning his health and his present circumstances both now and for the future by appeasing which gods will he fare better and more well."

Petitions concerning business

1. From a shepherd.

This has not been dated.

"...is it better or more good to raise sheep or not to."

2. From Cleotas.

This has not been dated.

"Cleotas asks Zeus and Dione if it is better and profitable for him to keep sheep."

3. From Phainylos.

This has been dated to the fourth century.

"God. For good fortune. Does the god give an oracle to Phainylos to work at his ancestral trade, to be a fisherman, and he will fare better and more well."

This is one of the inquiries that is used to prove that the oracle gave written answers. The break suggested after "trade" could end the question, however, the initial invocation makes it more likely to be an oddly phrased question.

4. From Aeschylinas

This has not been dated.

"...whether it would be a good thing to go to the Tisatis in Adria."

5. From an unknown businessman.

This has not been dated.

"Zeus, Lord, Fortune. Will I make a profit by carrying goods around."

6. From an unknown businessman.

This has not been dated.

"A man asks of the god to be reassured in his commercial enterprise."

This comes from a patched fragment. The petitioner asks the god for help in his business without saying what the business is which he is undertaking.

7. From an unknown petitioner.

This has not been dated.

"...is it better or more good to buy land and a house in town."

8. From an unknown petitioner.

This has been dated to the fifth century.

"Whether if I have acquired the house in town and the plot of land, it would be better and more profitable for me."

9. From Parmenidas.

This has not been dated.

"For good fortune. Parmenidas inquires of Zeus Naios and Dione will it be better and more good for him staying at home."

10. From an anonymous petitioner.

This has been dated to the fifth century.

"By having prayed to what god is one to achieve what he has in mind."

The above is another example of the petitioner asking the god for help without telling the god what it is he wants his help in doing. It would almost appear

that the petitioner does not really trust his god and is attempting to gain favor without committing himself. Or perhaps he feels that the god already knows everything and so does not need to be told.

11. From Alcinoos.

This has been dated to the fourth century.

"God. Fortune. Alcinoos inquires of Zeus Naios and Dione whether it would be better and more good for Niceas to construct the workshop."

Apparently the petitioner is inquiring on behalf of a third party who was unable to come to the oracle.

12. From Socrates.

This has not been dated.

"Socrates inquires of Zeus Naios and Dione by engaging in what work it may be better and more well for himself and his family."

13. From an anonymous petitioner.

This has not been dated.

"Good fortune. Whether by trading I can have such fortune as seems profitable to me, and by exporting, where it seems good with guileless skill."

A translator's note suggests that the petitioner may have been Rhodian from the dialect used.

14. From Arizelos.

This has not been dated.

"Gods. Good fortune. Arizelos asks the god by making or doing what thing will it be better and more good for him and will he have a good possession of property."

15. From Avandrus.

This has not been dated.

"Avandrus seeks to know by what prayer or worship he may fare best now and forever."

Petitions concerning stolen property

1. From Agis.

This has not been dated.

"Agis asks Zeus Naios and Dione about the blankets and the pillows which he has lost whether someone from outside may have stolen them."

2. From Aristocles, the slave's owner or one of those accused of kidnapping him.

This has been dated to the fifth century.

"God. Good fortune. Did Archonidas not kidnap the servant of Aristocles or Archebios the son of Archonidas kidnap him or Sosandros who was once the slave of him or of his wife."

It would appear from this petition that the god was also used to settle legal disputes.

3.. From Satyros.

This has not been dated.

"For good Fortune. Satyros consults Zeus Naios and Dione was the Scythian of Satyros not packed up; in Elea he would have stripped the hide off the racing steed of Dorilaus alias Actius."

The above petition helps to prove that the oracle was used by all classes of people. It is apparently written in the jargon of the stables and so is not so easily understood.

4. From an anonymous petitioner.

This has not been dated.

"Did Dorkilos steal the cloth?"³⁷

Dodona's Heritage

Besides the petitions recorded on the lead tablets, Dodona has a great number of legendary petitions surrounding it. Certainly, some of these legends are complete fabrication, such as the one concerning Hercules; but others of them may have a thread of historical truth, such as the oracles sanctioning of Athens' expedition to Sicily. In any case, all these tales make up the traditional heritage of Dodona and for this reason they are included.

Dodona in Homer

The first written mention of the oracle at Dodona is in the Iliad in which Homer refers to Dodona concerning the cult of Athena. In the beginning of the Iliad, before the ships set sail, a contingent joined the Greek side led by Teuthis who managed to get involved in a quarrel with

³⁷ These petitions may be found in the following sources: Grant, Hellenistic Religions, p. 33; Myers, Essays, p. 27; Nilsson, Greek Folk Religion, p. 125; Parke, Zeus, pp. 264-273; Payne, "Archaeology Report," p. 87; Stratton, Dodona, p. iii.

Agamemnon when the fleet was detained at Aulis. The argument raged so hotly that Teuthis was preparing to lead his troops home when Athena appeared in the guise of Melas, the son of Ops, and attempted to persuade him to remain. Teuthis, in raging anger, struck Melas (Athena) in the thigh with his spear and then led his army away. When he reached home he had a vision of Athena wounded in the thigh which was followed by a wasting disease which attacked him and a famine that blighted only his town of Arcadia. Subsequently, an oracle from Dodona instructed the inhabitants to make a statue of Athena showing her wounded and this would appease the goddess.³⁸ Homer also mentions Dodona in connection with the prayer of Achilles (see page one).

Homer's third reference to Dodona occurs in the Odyssey. Odysseus, on his way home, stops at Dodona to learn what would be the best way for him to return home. According to Homer, Odysseus was going to Dodona, so that "from the high foliaged oak tree he might hear the will of Zeus on the question how he should return to the rich land of Ithaca, now that he had been absent so long: whether to return secretly or openly."³⁹

³⁸ Homer Iliad 2. 609.

³⁹ Homer Odyssey 14. 327.

Dodona and the Argonauts

In another mythical work, the Argonautica, the oak of Dodona plays an important role. When Argus began to build the fifty-oared ship Argo the goddess Athena decided to assist him. Athena went to Dodona and took a limb of the sacred oak to fashion the keel of the ship, thus giving to the Argo the power of speech.

According to the legend, the Argo spoke three times: once on being launched; "and a strange cry did the Argo herself utter urging them to set forth;" again when a new helmsman was chosen and finally at the furthest point of the journey. This last time the ship warned them "that they should not escape the wrath of Zeus, nor the endless sea, nor grievous tempests, unless Circe should purge away the guilt of the ruthless murder of Apsystus" the brother of Medea.⁴⁰

The other mention of Dodona in the mythology of Greece concerns the labors of Hercules. It would seem that as Hercules was approaching the end of his twelve labors he arrived at the ancient oracle. It was here that he learned the end of his labors was near.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Apollonius Rhodius Argonautica 4. 594.

⁴¹ Apollodorus The Library 2. 5.

Athens and Dodona

1. There was an ancient prophecy from Dodona which Athens had received before the age of the Attic kings. It stated:

Beware of the hill of Ares and the altar of the Eumenides, rich in incense, where it is fated that the Lacedaemonians, when hard pressed by the spear, become your suppliants. See that you do not slay them with steel nor treat the suppliants wrongfully; for they are holy and sacred.⁴²

These words of the oracle were recalled during the Peloponnesian War when the Spartans had invaded the land of Attica. At one point some Spartans had managed secretly to enter the city by night and when, on the next day, they found themselves deserted by their allies they took refuge in the Areopagus and at the altar of Eumenides. The Athenians, in accordance with the wish of the oracle, allowed the Spartans to retire unhurt.⁴³

2. During the Peloponnesian War the oracle at Delphi championed the cause of Sparta. Thus, Athens preferred to consult the ancient and nearly inaccessible oracle at Dodona. Until around 425 B.C., when Athens began to consult Zeus at Dodona, to counteract the hostility of Delphi, Dodona seems to have played no part in politics.

⁴²Pausanias Achaia 25. 1.

⁴³Ibid., 25. 3.

That Athens consulted the god at Dodona is proven by fragments of an inscription on bronze which record an Athenian dedication and seems to be a memorial to a naval victory. During this same period, Athens sought the authority of Zeus to establish the Thracian goddess Bendis as a local deity.⁴⁴

Dodona ventured into politics when representatives of Athens approached Zeus with a question: should Athens carry out the proposed attack on Sicily? Feelings in Athens were, by this time, probably running in favor of the expedition, and so Zeus gave his blessings in saying that Athens should settle in Sicily. After receiving this encouragement, the Athenian forces sailed to Sicily and absorbed a terrible defeat. When news of the disaster finally reached Athens a shadow of suspicion and doubt was cast on the oracle, but the priestess of Zeus had the answer. Outside of the north gate of Athens lay a small ridge or hill which was referred to as Sckkilia; this, said the priestess, must have been what Zeus was referring to when he ordered Athens to colonize. Once again, by suitable ambiguities, the oracle had proven itself correct.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Parke, Oracles, p. 110.

⁴⁵Nilsson, Greek Folk Religion, p. 131; Parke, Oracles, p. 111.

3. Dodona made another prediction concerning the Peloponnesian War. This prediction declared that the war would last "thrice nine years" and time has proven this to be correct.⁴⁶
4. The philosopher, Xenophon (426-355 B.C.) when he was concluding his planned reforms of state, asked the oracle "whether it is more right and better for the city, for the present and the future, if it is thus organized?" The oracle is said to have agreed that the reforms were good.⁴⁷

Sparta and Dodona

The Spartans were rather late in beginning to consult the fabled oracle, but once they began they registered quite a number of consultations.

1. In 397 B.C. Agesilaus began his reign as one of the two Spartan kings. That he was ever chosen king is in itself unusual because he was extremely short and lame, making him a laughingstock among his fellow Spartans. Agesilaus was, nevertheless, a good general and led a number of plundering raids against the Persians in Ionia. The campaign ended when the Spartan fleet was destroyed

⁴⁶Thucydides The Peloponnesian War 5. 26.

⁴⁷Xenophon Ways and Means 6. 2.

at Cnidos and Agesilaus was recalled by the state to defend the country against a Greek coalition. Before this soldier-king left on his campaign he asked for and received oracular blessings to make the trip to Ionia from Dodona, but this is only legend and has not been proven.⁴⁸

2. In 371 B.C. is the first recorded instance of an official consultation with Zeus at Dodona by the Spartans. The author, Callisthenes, records that the Spartans were inquiring about a victory in their war with Thebes. The priestess, who was in charge of the oracle, is said to have told the Spartans that they ought not to be thinking of victories but of saving themselves. This is foreshadowing the disaster at Leuctra.⁴⁹
3. The Spartans received a still more direct warning concerning their fate at Leuctra. Not long before the battle took place, (in 371 B.C.) Spartan ambassadors were at the oracle to question the god on the outcome of the approaching battle. The questions were written and placed in jars before the priestess. Shortly before the ceremony was to take place, the pet monkey

⁴⁸Xenophon Hellenica 3.4.

⁴⁹Cicero De divinatione l. 74.

of the Molossian king, who was also at the sanctuary, raced into the sacred precinct and tipped over the jar containing the lots. The priestess is said to have reported that this ruined the prophecy and at the same time foretold of the great disaster.⁵⁰

4. Perhaps the most interesting of the prophecies concerning the Spartans took place in 367 B.C. and related to military prospects on the eve of an approaching battle. The oracle at Dodona told the Spartans that they would win a "tearless victory." After the outbreak of hostilities, a Spartan army under Archidamus was met by a strong force of Arcadians and Argives. The Spartans were at first hard pressed, but quickly rallied and broke through the enemy ranks, inflicting heavy losses in gaining a complete victory—without a single Spartan being killed! The results of this battle are recorded by Xenophon, but there is a discrepancy.

Since Xenophon was a religious man who strongly believed in oracles, why would he record "tears" in connection with the victory? He writes that "when they heard the news of the victory, the elders and

⁵⁰ Cicero De divinatione l. 74.

ephora all of them wept." It appears as if the oracle, and the title "tearless victory," were late inventions because the method of cleromancy does not lend itself to verbal responses. Still, it is not impossible that the priestess of Zeus, at the original consultation, had drawn lots which signified that the war would be without loss and that this was later worked up into the story in the form which Xenophon records it.⁵¹

5. By the end of the Peloponnesian War the prestige of the oracles had waned. Thus, Lysander, in seeking to overthrow the Spartan constitution, tried to persuade the oracle to help him, but he failed. Lysander's plan was to throw open the voting to all descendants of Hercules, as there would then be little doubt that he would be elected. Lysander wanted the support of Dodona because, due to the religious zeal of the people, he realized that a line of oracle was worth pages of rhetoric. The fact that Lysander tried to use the oracle shows the degree to which the oracle had been previously corrupted.⁵²

⁵¹Xenophon Hellenica 7. 1.

⁵²Charles Sankey, Spartan and Theban Supremacies (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), p. 89.

Corinth at Dodona

1. The story of Corinthian contact with the oracle at Dodona has the ring of pure myth. It is said that Aletes consulted the oracle of Zeus about the kingship of Corinth and received the reply that he would conquer whenever someone gave him a clod of earth, and he attacked on a day of many garlands. Aletes went to Corinth as a begger and asked for bread. Instead he was given a clod of earth. As it was also a festival day for the dead and garlands were placed on many of the tombs he acted as the oracle suggested and made his attack instantly, and the city was his.⁵³

Thessaly at Dodona

1. For years the Thessalians had been making a yearly voyage to Troy in a vessel rigged with a black sail to make an offering to the famed Achilles. Myth relates that Zeus at Dodona ordered that this sacrifice should be made.⁵⁴

⁵³Pindar Nemean Odes 7. 155.

⁵⁴Thomas Seymore, Life in the Homeric Age (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1963), p. 534.

The Molossians at Dodona

1. There are only two stories concerning the Molossians at Dodona. The first involves the pet monkey of the Molossian king who tipped over the jar of lots and thus ruined the Spartan's hopes for a favorable reply. This story has been related on page 95.
2. Alexander I, of Molossi, who was placed on the throne in 342 B.C. by Philip II of Macedon, is the figure of the second story. It was Alexander's hope to unite Epirus, in the form of a symmarchy, with himself as hegemon. He conquered most of southern Italy, allied with Rome, and was finally defeated and killed at Pandosia. It is about his death that the oracle speaks. Dodona warned "Son of Aeacus, beware to go to the Acherusian water and Pandosia, where it is fated you should die." Upon hearing this, Alexander had his ministers locate these fatal places and inform him of their whereabouts. Places of these names were pointed out to him in Thesprotia which he thereafter carefully avoided. Alexander's fate finally caught up with him at a fortress in Brettium on the river Acheron. The local people refer to three nearby hills as Pandosia, and it was there that Alexander met his death in 330 B.C. thus fulfilling the prophecy of

the oracle.⁵⁵ Alexander's death once again proved to the Greeks that a person who thinks he is escaping from a fate foretold by the gods is really bringing it on himself.

Pyrrhus at Dodona

1. This is the last instance of an historic consultation at Dodona as recorded by any ancient writer. Pyrrhus, was a warring king of Epirus who assisted Tarentum in its fight against Rome. After several battles, including a victory at Heraclea in 280 B.C., Pyrrhus fought Rome to a draw at Beneventum in 275 B.C., after which he returned to Epirus with only one third of his original force. His connection with Dodona is supposed to have occurred before his wars with Rome. Presumably he asked to what gods and goddesses should offerings be made to insure his success. The Dodonaean priestess included the temple of Athena at Lindos, on Rhodes, in her list of sanctuaries to receive offerings. She also instructed Pyrrhus to give his arms and bridle to the god.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Strabo Geography 6. 5.

⁵⁶Parke, Zeus, p. 146.

Boeotia at Dodona

1. This particular oracular petition has been purposely saved to conclude this study. After reading the double-talk of the priestess, and the mystic methods of response employed by the priestesses and priests at Dodona, a note of humor may be appreciated. The results of this petition are solely responsible for the revival of the priests at Dodona after the priestesses had fully taken control.

It seems that some envoys from Boeotia were sent to make an inquiry of the god at Dodona; whatever their question was has been lost in time, but their actions remain. The priestess, Myrtilé, is said to have reported:

that it would be best for you to do the most impious thing possible.

The envoys immediately rushed the priestess, laid hands on her sacred personage, and plunged her into the pot of boiling water which stood before her, remarking that they could think of nothing more impious than that! They later justified their actions by explaining that they had acted justly because if she had spoken falsely she had had her punishment, and if she had spoken rightly, then they were only carrying out her instructions.

The actions of these Boeotian envoys caused the reinstatement of the priests in order that they would be able to answer any further petitions from Boeotia. It was later explained that the oracle had meant for the Boeotians to steal one of the tripods and then at a later date to replace it. To remind the Boeotians of their sacrilege they were commanded once each year to arrive secretly at Dodona by night, carrying a covered tripod and place it in the sanctuary as an offering of reconciliation to Zeus.⁵⁷

⁵⁷Strabo Geography 9. 4.

CONCLUSION

For over 1500 years the oracle at Dodona was a central figure in the rites of Greek religion. Zeus spoke to his people and they came to him in the manner of children asking questions of their father. In time the ancient gods no longer filled the needs of the people and the oracle declined. Fewer and fewer petitioners came to consult the gods, and the oracle died a slow and lingering death. The oracle was devastated by the Aetolians in 219 B.C., but they did not cut down the sacred oak and the temple arose again. In 167 B.C. the Roman Paullus defeated Perseus at the battle of Pydna and Greece fell under the heavy hand of Rome. Epirus was particularly singled out for destruction as over seventy towns were razed and 150,000 people sold into slavery. For all practical purposes the oracle ceased to function from this time. The shrine still stood and was probably used by the local citizenry until the early years of Christianity in Greece when a final, thorough and systematic destruction took place. The early Christians ruined the temples, dug up the roots of the sacred trees and burned them.

Although a cloud still hangs over the oracle at Dodona, some facts are known. Dodona was the oldest sanctuary in Greece and was highly respected. During the classical period Dodona was the only rival to Delphi, the only other oracle that carried equal prestige in the eyes of the Greeks.

The Selli were the priests of Zeus and although their origin is unknown, Philostratus the Elder does leave a list of their duties. During the classical age priestesses superseded the priests, although a priesthood did remain at the oracle.

Archaeology has provided a rather complete picture of the physical aspects of the oracle, including its sacred grove of oaks, the gong and the temple built at the sanctuary. It has also given modern historians factual information on the activities at the oracle due to the discovery of the lead tablets and their petitions to Zeus and Dione. The tablets have proven that the common man made the journey to Dodona to lay his problems before the god of the oak and that he was satisfactorily answered.

The number of classical myths relating to the oracle tend to show that it was highly regarded by the people of its time. Unfortunately, there is still a great deal unknown concerning the oracle, its origins, the question of the doves,

and the method of answering the petitioners. It can only be hoped that historians will continue to search the grove of sacred oaks in Epirus and that one day, someone will find the key to unlock the remaining secrets of Dodona.

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