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THE ORIGINS OF DODONA: REINTERPRETING THE ANCIENT SOURCES

Abstract. – This study proposes a comprehensive reinterpretation of the origins of the sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona by integrating literary, linguistic, and archaeological evidence. It argues that Dodona originated in the Late Bronze Age as a highland meeting place embedded within transhumant pastoral networks linking Epirus and Thessaly. A re-examination of the Homeric *Catalogue of Ships* suggests that there was only one Dodona, namely the one in Epirus, and that a separate "Thessalian Dodona" did not exist; rather, the passage reflects seasonal movement between the Pindus highlands and the Peneus valley in Thessaly. The Iron Age traditions preserved by Ephorus further indicate sustained interaction between Boeotian-Cadmian/Mycenaean groups and Dodona, including the ritualised theft and dedication of tripod-cauldrons – an act symbolizing territorial sovereignty and religious legitimisation. The principal contribution of this study is its reinterpretation of the myth of the Dodonaean "talking doves" (πελειάδες). It proposes that this mytheme originated in a linguistic misinterpretation of a Thessalian dialect word for cauldron (*πέλ(λ)ια), phonetically convergent with πέλεια and πέλια ("dove" and "old woman"). The resonant bronze cauldrons, central to Dodonaean oracular practice, were thus reinterpreted as prophetic birds or priestesses. This reinterpretation was facilitated by pre-existing cultic elements at Dodona, including arboreal nymph traditions, the practice of ornithomancy, and the fifth-century BCE introduction of Aphrodite's dove symbolism. Parallel Boeotian traditions linking Thebes, Dodona, and Libya further support this reconstruction. The myth of the doves is therefore not an original ornithological cult motif but the fossilised outcome of dialectal homonymy, ritual acoustics, and the assimilation of historical events. Dodona's most enigmatic tradition thus preserves, in transformed form, the memory of resonant bronze vessels rather than winged messengers of Zeus.

The Sanctuary at the Time of the Trojan War (Homer's Dodona)

The earliest written references to the sanctuary at Dodona date to the eighth century BCE. They occur in the Homeric poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which refer to the period of the Trojan War, corresponding

in modern chronological terms to the twelfth century BCE and thus to the archaeological period of the Late Bronze Age.

In the *Odyssey*, Dodona is mentioned as the place where Zeus delivered his oracular responses (Hom. *Od.* 14.327-328). In the *Iliad*, Dodona appears in the prayer of Achilles to Zeus, invoked under the epithets "Dodonaios," "Pelasgikos," and "ruler of wintry Dodona" (Hom. *Il.* 16.233-234). Dodona is also mentioned in another Homeric passage (Hom. *Il.* 2.748-752), belonging to the *Catalogue of Ships*. This catalogue, although attached to the *Iliad*, has been considered by some scholars to be older and to date back to the Late Bronze Age – contemporary with the Trojan War – although certain sections are later additions.[1]

The *Catalogue* describes the contingents that participated in the Trojan War. The passage concerning Dodona refers to the Enienes and the Peraebi, who resided in the valley of the river Peneus in Western Thessaly, in north-central Greece:

> Γουνεὺς δ' ἐκ Κύφου ἦγε δύω καὶ εἴκοσι νῆας·
> τῷ δ' Ἐνιῆνες ἔποντο μενεπτόλεμοί τε Περαιβοὶ
> οἳ περὶ Δωδώνην δυσχείμερον οἰκί' ἔθεντο,
> οἵ τ' ἀμφ' ἰμερτὸν Τιταρησσὸν ἔργα νέμοντο
> ὅς ῥ' ἐς Πηνειὸν προΐει καλλίρροον ὕδωρ […]

The passage is usually translated:

> "And Gouneus led from Cyphus twenty-two ships, and with him followed the Enienes and the Peraebi, firm in fight, *who had set their dwellings about wintry Dodona, and dwelt in the ploughland about lovely Titaressus*, that pours its fair-flowing streams into Peneus […]" (Hom. *Il.* 2.748-752, tr. Murray, 1999).[2]

This translation inevitably leads to the conclusion that the Dodona mentioned here was located in Thessaly, since the river Peneus indisputably flows through that region. This "Thessalian Dodona" is thus consi-

[1] For the *Catalogue of Ships*, see Allen 1910; 1921; Simpson and Lazenby 1970; Visser 1997; Anderson 1995; Kirk 1985. The passage of the *Catalogue* referring to Thessaly contains two indications of its prehistoric date. First, the term Thessaly itself is not mentioned at all. This could be explained if the passage was composed before the migration of the Thessalians into the region later called Thessaly, a movement which, according to the ancient sources, took place after the Trojan War (see below). Secondly, according to the analyses of Page (1959), Allen (1921: 138-141) and Wace and Thompson (1912: 254), the localities of Thessaly mentioned in the *Catalogue* did not exist in the historical period. These places should therefore correspond to prehistoric (Late Bronze Age) settlements that had been abandoned by historical times. Simpson and Lazenby (1970: 164) also consider that the section of the *Catalogue* referring to Thessaly was composed shortly after 1200 BCE.

[2] Homer, *Iliad* 1-2. Trans. A. T. Murray, rev. W. F. Wyatt. Loeb Classical Library 170–171. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. Italics are mine.

dered distinct from the Dodona mentioned in the *Odyssey* (Hom. *Od*. 19.296) and in Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women* (Hes. *Cat*. fr. 240 M-W), which was located in Epirus, in north-western Greece. The first scholars to attempt to locate the Homeric "Thessalian Dodona" were the 4th-century BCE Thessalian historians Souidas (FGrHist 602 F 11) and Cineas (FGrHist 603 F 2), both cited by Strabo (Str. 7.7.12). Numerous other ancient scholars (Mnaseas fr. 20; Philoxenus ap. Steph. Byz. s.v. Δωδώνη; Epaphroditus ap. Steph. Byz. s.v. Δωδώνη; Str. 7.7.12; Schol. *Il.* 16. 233a1) as well as virtually all modern scholars who have addressed the question[3] have likewise attempted to locate it. Yet, despite sustained efforts over several centuries, it has proved impossible to identify the archaeological site of this supposed "Thessalian Dodona."

A New Interpretation

I argue here that there was never a separate "Thessalian Dodona", but only one Dodona – the sanctuary in Epirus. The Homeric passage has been consistently misinterpreted from antiquity to the present day. A correct reading reveals that it refers to Late Bronze Age shepherds practising transhumance between Thessaly (the valley of the Peneus) and the highlands of Epirus (Dodona).

I propose translating the passage as follows:

> "And Gouneus led from Cyphus twenty-two ships, and with him followed the Enienes and the Peraebi, firm in fight, *who, after they had set up their huts about the hard-to-winter Dodona, were now occupying the lands about lovely Titaressus*, which pours its fair-flowing streams into Peneus […]"[4]

I interpret οἰκί' as [τα] οἰκί[α], the neuter plural of τό οἰκίον. According to Eustathius (Eust*. ad Hom. Il.* 4.368.2), οἰκίον is a diminutive of οἶκος ("house"), meaning a "small dwelling". In the *Iliad*, it can also denote a "nest" (e.g. of wasps, Hom. *Il*. 12.168, 16.261; of an eagle, Hom. *Il*. 12.221). Thus, instead of "dwellings" I translate [τα] οἰκία as "small dwellings" or "huts" and the phrase οἰκί' ἔθεντο as "after they had set up their huts". I understand the aorist ἔθεντο as denoting an action completed prior to the narrative present (often rendered by an English past perfect), whereas the imperfect νέμοντο indicates an ongoing situation. If the Enienes and the Peraebi had first set up their huts around "hard-to-winter" Dodona and then were occupying lands in Thessaly, the logical inference is that they had moved from Dodona to the more temperate Thessalian plains for wintering.

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[3] Leake 1835: 455-62; Allen 1921, 131; Helly 1973: 58-59 (among many others).

[4] Italics are mine.

This pattern corresponds precisely to transhumant pastoral practice: in spring, after the snow melts, herders move to mountain pastures; in autumn, before snowfall, they descend to lowland valleys. The adjective δυσχείμερος, which refers to the severe winter conditions at Dodona and may be translated as "difficult to winter in," is unlikely to refer to the Enienes and the Peraebi themselves, since they are portrayed as hardy warriors. Rather, it probably refers to their livestock, whose wintering at Dodona, amid the mountains of Epirus, would have been especially arduous. This interpretation is further supported by Euripides' use of δυσχείμερος with reference to animals rather than human beings (Eur. fr. 1083).

Shepherds in Dodona: Ancient Testimonies and Archaeological Data

Ancient authors consistently describe Epirus as a land rich in herds. Hesiod (Hes. *Cat.* fr. 240 M-W) refers to Ellopia in Epirus as a region with "many crops and good meadowland, rich in flocks and shambling cattle". Hecataeus (Hecat. FGrHist 1a F 26) and Scylax (Scyl. 26) locate the Erytheian plain – whence Heracles drove Geryon's cattle – in Epirus. Pindar (Pind. *Nem.* 4) describes Epirus as a place "where jutting ox-pasturing headlands, beginning in Dodona, slope down to the Ionian Sea". Aristotle (Arist. *Hist. An.* 3.21, 522b), and later authors (Pliny, Varro, Hesychius, Suda), all emphasize the size and quality of Epirote cattle.[5]

Eustathius (Eust. *ad Hom. Od.* 1.121; cf. *Schol*. *Od*. 3.188) relates that Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, returned to Thessaly after the Trojan War and then, following a portent revealed by Helenus, journeyed to Epirus.[6] The portent described a land "where houses have iron foundations,

[5] For epigraphical evidence see Chapinal-Heras 2021: 209, no 73.

[6] Narratives concerning heroes and events of the distant past, sometimes referred to as "myths", are often regarded by modern scholars as later constructions of the Classical or subsequent periods, serving, among other things, political purposes. Within this interpretive framework, the account of Neoptolemus' arrival in Epirus has been interpreted by some scholars as an invention of the sixth century BCE (Piccinini 2017: 120 and references therein). Piccinini (at 125) goes even further, arguing that the entirety of Dodona's "foundation legends", such as those discussed in this article, was shaped by a political agenda designed to legitimize Epirote authority beyond the confines of Epirus. Yet, for such narratives to have persuaded their contemporary Greek audiences, they must have been grounded in a long-standing oral tradition and already accepted within collective memory as true accounts of the distant past, a process that presupposes at least an ancient core of historical reality (Hammond 1967: 386-389; Veyne 1983: 14; Sakellariou 1990: 20-23). Consequently, their content cannot be entirely fabricated or fictitious. However, just as the notion that these narratives are "complete fabrications" is often overly simplistic, so too is the opposite view, which treats them as exact historical accounts. During the long periods of their oral transmission, linguistic factors such as polysemy and homonymy, among many others, may have played an important role in the introduction of unrealistic or legendary elements into these narratives. Recovering the historical elements of such

wooden walls, and roofs of wool". In Epirus, by a lake, Neoptolemus found this place, where men fixed spears in the ground (the "iron foundations" and the "wooden walls" of the portent) and draped cloaks over them to form tents (the "roofs of wool" of the "houses" of the portent). These constructions closely resemble the tents of the Sarakatsani, a transhumant pastoral group in modern times. The Sarakatsani built huts from perishable materials[7] and practised seasonal movement: wintering in the valleys of Thessaly and Thesprotia (a region in north-western Greece) and moving in spring to the highlands of Epirus (the Pindus mountain range including Dodona) for summer grazing.[8]

It is possible that Dodona was associated with pastoral communities from a very early period, long before the construction of monumental buildings at the sanctuary, as it continued to be in more recent times.[9] Transhumant pastoralism is known to develop almost inevitably wherever suitable geographical and environmental conditions prevail, irrespective of the historical period. Such conditions were probably present in Thessaly and Epirus during the Late Bronze Age.[10] Archaeological excavations have

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narratives is a complex process and yet such elements are not beyond reconstruction (see Harissis 2014b; Harissis 2019). It is precisely on the basis of this reasoning that I approach and analyse all the narratives throughout the present article.

[7] Hatzimichali 1957: 45-47.

[8] Høeg 1925: 3; Hatzimichali 1957: tb. No. 24, 51.

[9] For the role of shepherds in Dodona, in the prehistoric period, see Hammond 1932, 140; Harissis 2014a; Piccinini 2017: 35-40. For the presence of shepherds in Dodona in the Classical and later periods see Quantin 2009; Chapinal-Heras 2021: 208-210.

[10] Halstead (1987) – followed by Cherry (1988) and others – has argued that nomadic specialised pastoralism did not exist in Late Bronze Age Greece. In his view, the archaeological and environmental evidence does not support the presence of organised transhumant systems in the Pindus region during that period. It has been shown that this conclusion is inaccurate (Harissis 2014a). I briefly summarize the principal counterarguments. Halstead regarded as decisive the absence of palynological evidence for large-scale forest burning in the Pindus mountain range, a practice typically associated with transhumant pastoralism, whereby wooded areas are intentionally cleared to create seasonal pasturelands. However, more recent palaeoenvironmental studies (Lawson et al. 2004; Gerasimidis et al. 2009) have identified precisely such indicators of anthropogenic burning in upland zones of Epirus, with evidence extending back to the Neolithic period. These findings significantly weaken the argument that systematic transhumant exploitation of highland pastures was absent in later prehistory in Greece. A second argument advanced by Halstead concerns the supposed absence of markets in Epirus capable of absorbing the products of large-scale livestock production, rendering specialised pastoralism economically implausible. This reasoning, however, overlooks the broader regional economic framework. The principal markets for pastoral products need not have been located in Epirus itself. Thessaly, with its substantial Mycenaean populations and "palatial" centres, provided precisely the kind of demographic concentration capable of sustaining large-scale exchange in animal products. Transhumant systems linking the highlands of Epirus with the Thessalian lowlands would therefore have been both economically viable and strategically advantageous. Taken together, the environmental and economic evidence suggests that or-

revealed traces of huts constructed from perishable materials[11], consistent with seasonal occupation in prehistoric Dodona. Additionally, archaeological evidence from Dodona indicates contacts with the Mycenaean world during the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE.[12] Transmission of these Mycenaean elements via Thessaly is probable. Such a scenario corresponds closely with the Homeric testimony of the *Catalogue of Ships*. The geography also supports this interpretation: the route to Dodona from ancient Thessalian Aeginion (modern Kalambaka; c. 150 km) or Trikka (modern Trikala; c. 180 km) to Dodona – across the Pindus range via a mountain pass rising to approximately 1,700 m – could have been completed in no more than three days on foot. Even from Larisa or Pharsalos (c. 250 km), the journey would have required only seven or eight days[13] – entirely feasible for mobile pastoral groups.

The Role of Shepherds in the Sanctuary of Dodona

A narrative preserved by Proxenus (Proxen. FGrHist 703 F 7) recounts that a shepherd named Mardylas stole a sheep while grazing in the marshes of Dodona. When the rightful owner consulted the god, the sacred oak revealed the identity of the thief. The story concludes with the appointment of a prophet after Mardylas attempted to cut down the sacred tree.[14]

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ganised seasonal pastoral mobility between the Pindus highlands and Thessaly cannot be excluded and, indeed, may represent a structural component of Late Bronze Age subsistence and exchange networks. For the Mycenaean settlements in Thessaly see Karouzou 2019; Vaiopoulou 2023. For a discussion of the question of transhumant pastoralism in prehistoric Epirus see also Tartaron 2004: 183-188.

[11] Vasileiou 2020: 5 with ref.

[12] Luce 2010; Vasileiou 2020.

[13] Méndez Dosuna 2018: 280.

[14] 'A certain Mardylas, a shepherd, stole a herd from another shepherd nearby, when pasturing his cattle in the marshes of Dodona, and kept it shut in his own fold. Thereupon, they say, the owner sought the stolen sheep among the shepherds, and, when he failed to find it, asked the god who was the thief. That was the occasion – so they say – when the oak tree first uttered a voice and said that it was the "youngest" of the attendants who was guilty. When he had searched out the meaning of the response, he found the sheep at the house of the shepherd who had most recently come to pasture in that region. For shepherds are called "followers". The thief's name was Mardylas. It is said that, in anger at the oak, he wanted to cut it down by night. But a "dove" (πελειάς) popped its head out from the trunk and ordered him not to do it. He was too frightened to venture further and did not touch this sacred tree. Even so, however, the Epirotes were righteously angry with him for his daring impiety, and therefore, after exacting a penalty from him for his stubbornness, they established a prophet'. (transl. Rzepka, Jacek, "Proxenos (703)", in: Brill's New Jacoby, General Editor: Ian Worthington (Macquarie University): dx.doi.org/10.1163/1873-5363_bnj_a703 First published online: 2016. Consulted online on 07 February 2021).

A Homeric passage may connect the Selloi (also called Helloi)[15] – the interpreters of Pelasgian Zeus at Dodona – with shepherds. Homer describes them as ἀνιπτόποδες "with unwashed feet" and χαμαιεῦναι "sleeping on the ground" (Hom. *Il.* 16.233-248). Sophocles (Soph. *Trach.* 1166-1167) refers to Dodona as "the grove of the Selloi – mountain dwellers and sleepers on the ground". Callimachus also mentions "Pelasgians" "sleeping on the earth". Ancient explanations varied: the Selloi were described as "barbarians", or "ascetic priests" bound to the sanctuary, or "warriors hardened by discipline".[16] By contrast, modern scholars often interpret these practices as ritual purity taboos intended to maintain contact with sacred "Mother Earth".[17] However, evidence for a cult of "Mother Earth" at Dodona is uncertain.[18] A simpler explanation may be preferable: I suggest that the Selloi were originally shepherds; they slept on the ground in their tents and walked barefoot, as the Sarakatsani did in modern times. Their feet would therefore have appeared perpetually unwashed, giving rise to the Homeric description.[19]

In this light, Dodona may originally have functioned as a meeting place where different pastoral tribes assembled during seasonal transitions, organising festivities of both secular and religious character.

The importance of Dodona for transhumant shepherds and their seasonal movements between the highlands in summer and the valleys in winter finds parallels in other major Greek sanctuaries and oracles, such as Delphi and Olympia.[20] Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised that these sanctuaries were not originally isolated "urban" cult centres but were closely connected to mountainous landscapes and pastoral routes. Situated near natural passes, valleys, and seasonal grazing zones, they likely functioned – at least in their formative stages – as periodic meeting points for transhumant populations. From this perspective, the sanctuary operated simultaneously as a meeting ground for different pastoral groups, a neutral space for arbitration and exchange, and a cultic focus legitimising intertribal cohesion.

Ethnographic parallels from modern transhumant populations – especially the Sarakatsani – suggest that seasonal gatherings at nodal points of movement were occasions not only for economic exchange but also for

[15] The alternate form Helloi / Selloi is ancient and exemplifies the vacillation between sigma and spiritus asper.

[16] The evidence and theories concerning the Selloi are reviewed by Dieterle 2007: 30-35.

[17] Cook 1965: 960; Parke 1967: 26 and many others.

[18] Georgoudi 2002: 115.

[19] For evidence of the Sarakatsani going barefoot, see Avity 1637: 1425; Høeg 1925: 29, 40-41.

[20] For evidence of the presence of transhumant shepherds in Delphi see Howe 2003 and Harissis 2019. For Olympia see Taita 2007: 87.

communal assemblies (πανηγύρεις), ritual observances, and reaffirmation of collective identity.

Conclusion

The passage of the *Catalogue of Ships* can thus be understood as referring to tribes of transhumant shepherds who, around the time of the Trojan War, camped during spring and summer in the highlands of Epirus and moved in winter to the rich pastures of the Peneus valley in Thessaly – in a seasonal pattern analogous to that documented among the Sarakatsani in modern times.

Taken together, literary testimony, archaeology, and geography converge on a coherent reconstruction: in the Late Bronze Age, Dodona was not a remote place, but a highland centre embedded in the seasonal pastoral networks linking Epirus and Thessaly.

The Sanctuary after the Trojan War (Ephorus' Dodona)

Contact between Thessaly and Dodona in the period following the Trojan War is attested in an important passage of Ephorus (Ephor. FGrHist 70 F 119 ap. Str. 9.2.3).[21] Ephorus' narrative refers to an incident that occurred two generations after the Trojan War (Thuc. 1.12.3; Str. 9.2.29; Hdt. 7.176), around the time of the so-called Aeolian colonisation[22] (Str. 9.2.3, 9.2.5), corresponding in modern archaeological chronology to the Iron Age.

Strabo (Str. 9.2.3-5), citing Ephorus, relates:

> 9.2.3 "Boeotia in earlier times was inhabited by barbarians – the Aones and the Temmices, who had wandered there from Sunium – and by the Leleges and the Hyantes. Then the Phoenicians occupied it, I mean the Phoenicians under Cadmus, who fortified the Cadmeia and left the dominion to his descendants. These Phoenicians founded Thebes in addition to the Cadmeia and maintained their rule, commanding most of the Boeotians until the expedition of the Epigoni. On that occasion they left Thebes for a short time but returned again. Likewise, when they were expelled by the Thracians and the Pelasgians, they established their power in Thessaly together with the Arnaeans for a considerable period, so that they were all called Boeotians. Then they returned to their homeland, about the time when the Aeolian fleet was ready to set sail from Aulis in Boeotia – that is, the fleet which the sons of Orestes were dispatching to Asia. After incorporating the territory of Orchomenus into Boeotia (for previously the

[21] See also *Suda* s.vv. Δωδώνη μαντεῖον, Μυίας δάκρυον; Proclus ap. Photius, *Bibliotheca* cod. 239, 321b; *Appendix proverbiorum* cent. 3.97; Heracleides ap. Zenobius 2.84; *Scholia in Dionysium Thracem* 450.19-20 Hilgard.

[22] Penthilos, leader of the Aeolians who colonised Lesbos and Aeolis, was regarded as the grandson of Agamemnon.

> Orchomenians were not part of the Boeotian community, nor did Homer enumerate them among the Boeotians, but as a separate people, calling them Minyae), they, together with the Orchomenians, expelled the Pelasgians […] and the Thracians […].
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> 9.2.4 […] While the war was still in progress, the Pelasgians went to consult the oracle [in Dodona], and the Boeotians did the same. Ephorus states that he cannot report the oracular response given to the Pelasgians; however, the prophetess told the Boeotians that they would prosper if they committed sacrilege. The envoys sent to consult the oracle, suspecting that the prophetess had responded thus out of favor toward the Pelasgians – since she was related to them and since the temple itself had originally been Pelasgian – seized (ἀνελεῖν) her and cast her upon a burning pyre. They reasoned that they were justified either way: if she had uttered a false oracle, she was rightly punished; if she had spoken truly, they had merely obeyed the oracle's command. The temple authorities, however, did not approve of putting men to death without trial – especially within the sanctuary – and therefore brought the perpetrators to trial before the priestesses, who were also prophetesses, the two surviving members of the original three. When the Boeotians objected that it was unlawful for women to act as judges, an equal number of men were appointed alongside the women. The men voted for acquittal, the women for conviction; and since the votes were equal, those for acquittal prevailed. Consequently, prophecies at Dodona are delivered by men only for the Boeotians. The prophetesses interpret the oracle to mean that the god commanded the Boeotians to steal the tripod-cauldrons and carry one of them to Dodona each year; and they indeed do so, for they remove one of the dedicated tripod-cauldrons by night, cover it with garments, and secretly carry it (τριποδηφορεῖν) to Dodona.
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> 9.2.5 After this, the Boeotians cooperated with Penthilus and his followers in founding the Aeolian colony, sending with him the majority of their people, so that it was also called a Boeotian colony." (Str. 9.2.3-5, tr. Jones 1924).

The Cadmians mentioned by Ephorus were the inhabitants of Thebes, called "Phoenicians" because of their descent from Cadmus of Phoenicia. The Cadmians were expelled from Thebes twice. First, they were driven out by the Argives (Hdt. 5.57) (the *Epigoni*), approximately one generation before the Trojan War[23]. Later, according to Ephorus (ap. Str. 9.2.3), they were expelled again by the Thracians and the Pelasgians, around the time of the Trojan War – but before the Aeolian migration, which occurred two generations later. After this second expulsion, they migrated to Thessaly. Herodotus (Hdt. 1.56) – probably drawing on the lost epic *Epigoni* (Hdt. 4.32) – states that the Cadmians settled in Thessaly.

[23] Allen 1921: 42.

Diodorus (Diod. Sic. 4.67) confirms this tradition. Ephorus (ap. Str. 9.2.3) further specifies that some of the Cadmians settled at Arne. Arne is identified with ancient Kierion (Steph. Byz. s.v. Ἄρνη) which is located near modern Karditsa[24] in Thessaly (approximately 120 km from Dodona). In my view, the Cadmians were Mycenaeans who, prior to the Trojan War, exercised authority over local tribes in Thessaly, just as Gouneus is described in the *Catalogue of Ships* as exercising authority over the Enianes and the Peraebi.[25] Later, according to Thucydides (Thuc. 1.12), the Cadmians were expelled from Thessaly by the Thessalians who had arrived in the region from Epirus.[26] Ephorus places this expulsion shortly before the Aeolian migration; thus, the Cadmians remained in Thessaly for a total of two or three generations. The Cadmians/Boeotians returned from Arne to Thebes, where they defeated the Pelasgians and Thracians and re-established control.[27]

Ephorus' narrative further illuminates Dodona's role. During their conflict with the Pelasgians and Thracians in Thebes, the Cadmians/Boeotians in Arne consulted the oracle at Dodona. The oracle instructed the Cadmians/Boeotians to commit an impious act. After an initial misunderstanding, they stole and killed a priestess, but the response was re-interpre-

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[24] Kieros, or Kierion, lies at Pyrgos near Sophades in the middle of the Thessalian plain, a short distance east of modern Karditsa and not far from the local sanctuary of Athena Itonia. A circuit wall, perhaps originally Mycenaean, is visible at the site (Leekley and Efstratiou 1980: 146; Vaiopoulou 2023: 123).

[25] Achilles was a native of Thessaly. For a review of the evidence for Mycenaean presence in Thessaly, see Karouzou 2019; Vaiopoulou 2023.

[26] The Thessalians were a people from Thesprotia who, approximately sixty years after the Trojan War, invaded the region that was later named after them. They initially gave their name to the district of Thessaliotis and subsequently to the whole of Thessaly. The fact that this invasion and the renaming of the region took place after the Trojan War may explain why the name "Thessaly" is not mentioned in the *Iliad*. The Thessalians traced their descent from Heracles and his followers, who before the Trojan War had colonised the Aegean islands of Nisyros, Karpathos, Kasos, Kos, and Kalymnos from Thebes (Pind., *Nem.* 4.40; Diod. Sic. 5.54; Apollod. *Epit.* 2.137). Pheidippus, the son of Thessalus and grandson of Heracles, led the fleet of these islands during the Trojan expedition (Hom. *Il.* 2.676). On his return from Troy, Pheidippus landed at Ephyra in Epirus (Vel. Pat. 1.1.1; Steph. Byz. s.v. *Dorion*). His son, Aiatos, crossed the Achelous river and Aiatos' son, Thessalus, defeated the Boeotians of Arne, who were still living in Thessaly at that time (Charax ap. Steph. Byz. s.v. *Dorion*; Polyaenus *Strat.* 8.44; Vel. Pat. 1.3.1). This event is connected with the testimony of Thucydides and Strabo that the Boeotians of Arne, expelled from Thessaly, settled in Boeotia sixty years (two generations) after the Trojan War, as well as with the account of Herodotus (7.176) that the Thessalians were originally Thesprotians who crossed into Thessaly. All this information appears to derive from the lost epic *Thesprotis* (see Hammond 1967, 386-387).

[27] The Cadmians already settled in Thessaly formed an alliance with the Minyans of Orchomenos – within what Strabo (9.2.2) describes as an amphictyony of several peoples – and together drove the Pelasgians and Thracians out of Thebes.

ted to mean that they should steal[28] tripod-cauldrons and send one annually to Dodona.

Their familiarity with Dodona is entirely plausible, given the pastoral mobility discussed above between Thessaly and Epirus. Other ancient sources suggest even broader northern movements of the Cadmians. Pausanias (Paus. 9.8.6) and Herodotus (Hdt. 5.61) report that after their expulsion from Thebes (prior to the Trojan War), the Cadmians migrated not only to Thessaly but also northward into Illyria. In Greek mythology, Illyrius – the eponymous ancestor of the Illyrians – is said to be the son of Cadmus. Other traditions place Cadmus himself in Illyria (Paus. 9.5.3; Apollod. *Bibl*. 3.5.4; Hyg. *Fab.* 184, 240, 254; Steph. Byz. s.vv. Βούθοι, Ἰλλυρία; Nic. *Ther.* 607-608; Ov. *Met.* 4.569-603). Apollonius (Ap. Rhod. *Argonautica* 4.517) and Apollodorus (*Bibl*. 3.5.4) agree that Cadmus was buried in Illyria. This tradition concerning Cadmus' displacement may preserve not a literal record of the hero's wanderings but the (pre)historical memory of the migrations of the Cadmians as a group. Thus, Ephorus' account preserves the memory of a sustained Thessalian-Epirote relationship extending from the Late Bronze Age into the Iron Age.[29]

A New Interpretation

The "theft" of a tripod and its cauldron was not a mere act of sacrilege but a highly symbolic ritual gesture. In Greek tradition, the seizure and dedication of a tripod-cauldron functioned as a foundational act signifying the assumption of territorial sovereignty – whether in the context of a newly founded colony or of conquered territory.[30] The possession of the tripod-cauldron symbolised possession of the land itself. Its ritual and political significance is reflected in several well-known traditions: the myth of Heracles' seizure of the Delphic tripod-cauldron,[31] the foundation of the Megarian settlement called "Tripods" (Paus. 1.43.7-8; Thuc. 4.70; Str. 9.394), and the Messenian oracle declaring that "whoever first places one hundred tripods around the altar of Zeus Ithomatas, to them heaven grants the Messenian land with victory" (Paus. 4.12.7).

The foundational role of the cauldron is also evident in the Argonautic tradition. According to Herodotus (Hdt. 4.179), Apollonius Rhodius (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.1547-1591) and Lycophron (Lycoph. *Alex*. 886ff),

[28] The verb used by Ephorus is ἀνελεῖν, which means both 'kill' and 'take up and carry off'.

[29] Here I follow the view that the narrative preserves the memory of a genuine prehistorical event (see also Sakellariou 1990: 187; Parmeggiani 2011: 210, n. 259). For a different approach, see Kowalzig 2007: 328–391.

[30] Defradas 1972: 123-146.

[31] The earliest testimonia are depictions on 6th-century BCE vases (Defradas 1972: 124-126).

Jason carried a bronze tripod-cauldron aboard the Argo, intending to dedicate it to Delphi. Blown off course to Libya, the Argonauts were trapped in the shallows of Lake Tritonis. The god Triton rescued them and demanded the tripod-cauldron as recompense. After receiving it, Triton placed the tripod-cauldron in his sanctuary and prophesied that numerous cities would one day be founded around Lake Tritonis when a descendant of the Argonauts recovered it.[32] Diodorus (Diod. Sic. 4.56.6) reports that the tripod-cauldron was later preserved in Hesperides near Cyrene, thus implying the fulfilment of the prophecy in the Greek colonisation of North Africa.

In each case, the tripod-cauldron functions as a material embodiment of divine sanction and territorial legitimacy. Within this symbolic framework, Ephorus' narrative acquires new meaning. The Cadmians/Boeotians asserted their dominance over the Pelasgians and Thracians through the ritual appropriation of the sacred object (belonging to a shrine in Thebes) that embodied territorial authority.

The subsequent dedication of the tripod-cauldron at Dodona is equally significant. It reflects a political and religious realignment of the Cadmians/Boeotians within a north-western sphere of influence.

Conclusion

The episode of Ephorus' narrative does not merely recount an act of sacrilege followed by ritual expiation. Rather, it encodes a political transformation: the ritual seizure of sovereignty, its legitimation through dedication at Dodona, and the integration of Thessalian Cadmian/Boeotian groups into a north-western religious network centred on Dodona. Whereas in the Late Bronze Age, Dodona may have functioned as a place of ritualised communal feasting, perhaps within an early amphictyonic framework, in the Iron Age the sanctuary gradually acquired a broader character. From the eighth century BCE onward, Dodona became archaeologically visible as a sanctuary of growing importance. Numerous bronze tripods and cauldrons have been discovered at Dodona, dating from the eighth century BCE onward.[33] The site's function shifted from that of an open-air meeting place where communal feasts were held to that of a Panhellenic sanctuary.

The Sanctuary in Classical Times (Herodotus' Dodona)

A central myth concerning the origins of the sanctuary at Dodona is the myth of the doves. A mantic dove appears in the story of the shepherd

[32] The exact term used is κομίζω, meaning 'carry off as a prize or booty'.

[33] Luce 2010: 28.

Mardylas recorded by Proxenus.[34] The principal source, however, is Herodotus' *Histories* (Hdt. 2), written around 430 BCE. Herodotus recounts the legend of the emergence of the oracle at Dodona "under a certain oak" (Hdt. 2.56.2) in "very remote times" (Hdt. 2.55.1-2). He presents two versions of the story, followed by his own interpretation. According to the first account (Hdt. 2.54), which Herodotus claims to have heard from the priests of Zeus at Thebes in Egypt, two women consecrated to Zeus were abducted by Phoenicians. Despite persistent efforts, the Egyptian priests were unable to trace them but later learned that one had been sold in Libya and the other in Greece. These two women, they maintained, founded the oracles of Zeus at Ammon in Libya and at Dodona in Greece. According to the second account (Hdt. 2.56), which Herodotus says he heard from the Dodonaean priestesses (προμάντιες), two black doves (πελειάδες) flew from Thebes in Egypt. One reached Libya; the other arrived at Dodona, where it perched upon an oak tree and proclaimed, in a human voice, that a sanctuary of Zeus should be established there. The Libyan dove performed a similar act at the oracle of Ammon.[35]

Herodotus ultimately favours the first explanation, the one that he heard from the priests of Zeus at Thebes in Egypt. He considers it more plausible that two priestesses were abducted from Egypt, and that the woman sold among the Thesprotians founded the sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona.

However, several scholars have argued convincingly that, although Herodotus likely visited Egypt – certainly the Delta and probably Memphis – he never travelled as far south as Thebes.[36] If this is correct, his claim to have obtained the Egyptian version directly from priests at Thebes becomes doubtful, and the reliability of this part of his testimony must be reassessed. Even if he did visit Thebes, the reliability of the priests' testimony remains questionable, since they themselves told Herodotus that the information had been passed on to them by others rather than being based on first-hand knowledge.

The myth of the *peleiades* appears in other sources as well. In a fragmentary Paean of Pindar (Pind. fr. 59 Maehler (= Rutherford S8); fr. 58 Maehler (= Rutherford F2; cf. Schol. *Soph. Trach*. 172); fr. 57 Maeh-

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[34] See no. 14.

[35] It should be noted that Herodotus does not necessarily refer to the well-known oracle of Zeus in the Siwa desert, but speaks more generally of Libya, where, as is well known, more than one sanctuary of Ammon Zeus existed (Malkin 1994: 158). The most prominent among them, at Cyrene, was, according to current evidence, established by at least the sixth century BCE (Rutherford 2001).

[36] Sourdille 1910: 38-41, 161-217, with extensive bibliography; Fehling 1989: 240-242. For ancient criticism of Herodotus, see also Lucian *Ver. Hist.* 2.31; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 37.7; Marcellin. *Vit. Thuc.* 27; and Plut. *De Herod. malign*.

ler),[37] mention is made of Dodona, the Helloi (or Selloi), Mount Tomaros at whose foot the oracle stood, and tripod-cauldrons. Thessaly and Thebes were also mentioned. In this Paean, Pindar reportedly spoke of two *peleiai*, one of which arrived at the temple of Ammon in Libya and the other at Dodona.[38] They had departed from Thebes, though it is not specified whether this refers to Thebes in Egypt or Thebes in Boeotia. But given Pindar's Boeotian origin, Thebes in Boeotia may well be meant. The scholiast on Sophocles states that Euripides referred to three doves at Dodona, while "others say two – one that came from Thebes to Ammon and the other to Dodona, as also Pindar says in the Paeans". If the scholiast is reliable – and there is a good reason to believe so since he paraphrases Herodotus accurately – then Pindar must have preserved a version similar to that recorded by Herodotus. Although Pindar's Paean cannot be precisely dated, it likely predates Herodotus' publication of the *Histories*.[39] Thus, Pindar's version may be the earliest attested literary version of the narrative and it is possible that Herodotus drew upon Pindar. His omission of any acknowledgement would not be surprising, as this was his customary practice.[40]

Silius Italicus (Sil. *Pun.* 3.678) describes two prophetic pigeons (*columbae*) of Aphrodite that flew from Thebes: one to Chaonia (Dodona), where it imparted prophetic power to the oak; the other across the Carpathian Sea to Libya, specifically to Marmarica between Cyrenaica and Egypt, where it founded the oracle of Ammon and prophesied while seated between the horns of a ram.[41] In this account, Thebes clearly refers to Thebes in Boeotia rather than in Egypt, since the bird flies in a north-south direction and passes over the Carpathian Sea, near Crete, on its way to Libya.

Servius (Serv. *ad Aen.* 3.466) preserves a similar tradition: one dove founded the oracle at Dodona, whereas the other founded that of Ammon in Libya. He calls them "doves of Hebe," daughter of Zeus and companion of Aphrodite. In another tradition attributed to the Hellenistic historians Thrasyboulos and Akestodoros (Schol. *Il.* 16.233; cf. Plut. *Pyrrhus*

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[37] See Rutherford 2001: 354 n. 9.

[38] Parke 1967: 57-59; Rutherford 2001: 351.

[39] Most historians believe that *The Histories* were published in stages between 430 and 425 BCE, although a minority of historians believe they contain references to events as late as 421 BCE (Sansone 1985). Pindar died around 438 BCE.

[40] Fehling 1989.

[41] Marmarica is today the northwestern part of Egypt and the eastern part of Tripolitania. It lies near Platea, the island first settled by the inhabitants of Thera when they initiated the colonisation of Libya. According to Strabo (Str. 17.3.23), Marmarica did not include the Siwa desert, where the famous oracle of Ammon Zeus was situated, though its territory extended as far as that region. For Marmarica, see Smith 1857: 277 s.v. *Marmarica*; Malkin 1994: 166 n. 122.

1; *Etym. Mag*. 293.2-10), a *peleiada* seated on the sacred oak advised Deucalion after the Flood to settle in Epirus, marry the nymph Dodona (one of the Oceanids), and name the land after her. Plutarch (Plut. *Pyrrhus* 1.1) names Deucalion and Pyrrha, founders of Dodona, and Nonnus of Panopolis (Nonn. Dion. 15.299) associates Deucalion with the sacred oak. This version clearly connects Boeotia – Deucalion's homeland – with Dodona.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.14.5), citing a Dodonaean tradition, mentions a talking, prophetic *peleia* seated on the oak. Servius (Serv. *ad Aen.* 3.466) recounts that one of the two doves prevented a woodcutter from cutting down the sacred tree by speaking in a human voice, an episode recalling the narrative of Proxenus mentioned earlier. In another version, mentioned by Servius, an Illyrian robber named Arces cut down the oak, causing the oracle to cease functioning. Perhaps the fragmentary testimony of Aelian (Ael. *NA* 11.27), which states that a "dove" was the cause of a war between the Chaonians and the Illyrians, is relevant in this context.

A scholiast on Sophocles (Schol. *Soph*. *Trach.* 172 = Pindar fr. 58 Maehler) reports that Euripides, in a lost work, spoke of three *peleiades* at Dodona. The scholiast assumes they were pigeons. In Sophocles (Soph. *Trach.* 172), the oak of Dodona, "through the mouth of two *peleiades*", delivers an oracle to Heracles concerning the end of his life. It remains uncertain whether the term refers to birds or to priestesses metaphorically called "doves".

Finally, three birds perched on and by a tree are depicted on a 4th-century BCE bronze coin of the Epirote League.[42] This iconography strongly suggests that the dove myth represented the official version of the sanctuary's origins in the Classical period.

The Talking Doves: A Bizarre Mytheme

The myth of a sacred oak hosting prophetic birds on its branches or trunk constitutes a peculiar and isolated phenomenon within the entire corpus of ancient Greek literature. Prophetic birds – especially birds endowed with human speech – are, in Greek mythology, an eccentric and exceptional motif rather than an established pattern.[43] For this reason, even in antiquity, it was difficult to accept that the *peleiades* were literally talking birds. Consequently, Herodotus (Hdt. 2.57) and others attempted

[42] Archaeological Museum of Ioannina, inv. no. AMI 403; Franke 1961: 317, pls 15, 64.

[43] The only extant parallels are Roman: for example, the myth of a prophetic woodpecker perched upon a wooden column (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.14.5), and the account of doves (*columbae*) that merely nested in a palm tree – where they do not normally nest – and thereby portended Caesar's victory (Suet. *Aug.* 94.11; cf. *Jul.* 94).

to rationalise the tradition. The search for a solution to this difficult problem has occupied both ancient and modern scholars.

Previous Interpretations

Herodotus proposes that the priestesses at Dodona were metaphorically called "doves". According to him, the first woman who founded the oracle spoke a language incomprehensible to the local population, and her speech sounded to them like the cooing of birds, thereby giving rise to the legend of the talking dove. Herodotus further adduces the detail – found only in the Dodonaean version – that the dove was black. He interprets this as evidence of the priestess' Egyptian origin, associating the black colour with dark skin.

Strabo (Str. 7a.1.1a–2), without retelling the myth itself, reports two interpretations circulating in his time. According to the first, the *peleiades* were actual pigeons, but they did not speak; rather, they indicated the will of the god through the pattern of their flight – a kind of ornithomancy.

According to the second interpretation, the original term was not πέλεια ("dove") but πέλια, meaning "old woman" because in the dialect of the "Thesprotians and Molossians", the adjective πέλιος/πέλια meant "elderly". Thus, the *peliai* were priestesses so called because of their age. Strabo reinforces this etymology by citing the term πελιγόνες in "Macedonian, Laconian, and Massaliote" dialects, where it denotes "elders".

This second explanation, that the term means "elder", was adopted by Pausanias (Paus. 10.12.10), by Eustathius who cites Strabo (Eust. *ad Hom. Od.* 2.72), and by Hesychius (s.vv. πέλειαι, πελείους) who use the <ει> spelling rather than the <ι> one of Strabo. Servius (Serv. *Aen.* 3.466 and *Buc.* 9.13) reports that in the "Thessalian" dialect "peliades" could mean both "doves" and "prophetesses" and he even mentions an old prophetess named "Pelias".

Philostratus (Philostr. *Im.* 2.33), describing a painting of six priestesses of Dodona, suggests yet another interpretation: πέλεια was neither a priestess nor a real bird, but a golden dove (or hen) placed on the branches of the sacred oak, supposedly brought from Thebes. Thebes in Boeotia is probably meant. The allusion is uncertain.

Modern scholarship has also sought naturalistic explanations; it has been suggested that the myth reflects the migratory movements of wild pigeons between Dodona and North Africa.[44] This theory identifies the birds with *Columba livia* (rock dove).[45] However, *Columba livia* is not a

[44] Quantin 2008: 37-38, 2011: 80.

[45] Ancient authors distinguished several species of dove or pigeon, to which they applied a bewildering array of names. It is difficult to determine which species are meant,

migratory species,[46] nor are the other wild pigeons native to Greece, the *Columba oenas* (stock dove) and the *Columba palumbus* (woodpigeon). These species are largely sedentary.[47]

A New Interpretation: "Cauldrons" instead of "Doves"

In ancient Greek, the word λέβης signifies "cauldron, bowl, kettle, basin, pan, bath". There is also a substantial group of words synonymous with λέβης that belong to pastoral vocabulary and denote "bowl, kettle, basin, bucket, cup, vase" and, more generally, various kinds of receptacle. All derive from the root πέλ-.[48] This group includes the word πέλλα (-ης) (Ion. πέλλη) (f.), pronounced [pélla] (cf. Hom. *Il*. 16.642; Theoc. 1.26; Nic. *Al*. 311; Pind. fr. 104b.5), a word that, Athenaeus notes, denoted "a skyphos-like vessel with a widened base" and that grammarians considered it to belong to the "Thessalian and Aeolic" dialect. It also meant "wooden bowl" or "bucket", but it is quite probable that it had the broader sense of "receptacle" or "basin", just like the other words in the group from the root πέλ-. It is most likely of non-Indo-European origin.[49] The presence of the geminate <λλ> suggests that a semivowel yod /j/ once existed between <λ> and the preceding vowel <α>.[50] This phonological development appears to have begun toward the end of the Mycenaean period and to have been completed before the time of the Homeric epics (c. eighth century BCE), by which time the term πέλλα is attested.[51] I suggest the

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but it seems likely that the rock dove, wood pigeon, and turtle dove were recognised. The now ubiquitous collared dove has spread into southern Greece only in recent times and was probably unknown to ancient Athenians (Lamberton and Rotroff 1985: 8). In Homer (Hom. *Il.* 21.494), πέλεια denotes the wild pigeon, usually identified with the wood pigeon (*Columba palumbus*; modern Greek φάσσα), as opposed to the domesticated pigeon (*Columba livia domestica*), though elsewhere it appears to be identified with the latter (Thompson 1966: 177). In some cases, however, πέλεια may denote the wild rock dove (*Columba livia*). The stock dove (*Columba oenas*), which some scholars have proposed as the ancient πέλεια (Robert 1911: 50; Thompson 1966: 130), is rare in Greece and does not adequately account for the numerous references to πέλεια in ancient Greek literature. For further discussion, see Robert 1911: 48-51; Thompson 1966: 129 ff.; Parke 1967: 43; Pollard 1977: 56-57.

[46] Svensson and Grant 2007: 214. The only bird of the family *Columbidae* that migrates to Africa is *Streptopelia turtur* (modern Greek τρυγόνι).

[47] Others, such as Parke (1967: 59), suggest that the myth was developed by the priestesses in order to enhance the prestige of Dodona by emphasizing its antiquity.

[48] πελλίς ('receptacle, vase, pail'), πελίκη ('basin, cup'), πελλίνιον ('vase'), πέλυξ ('wooden bowl'), πελάχνη ('cup'), πελίχνη ('wooden bowl'), πελλητήρ (cf. Hesych. πελλαντήρ) ('milk-pail' or 'milker').

[49] Beekes 2010 s.v. πέλλα 1.

[50] Schulze 1892: 84; Boisacq 1916: 763; Chantraine 1968: 877. For the standard treatment of /lj/ > <λλ> in all Greek dialects, see Lejeune 1987: 156, 171.

[51] The term may be attested in Linear B as *pe-ra₂* (KN X 999), which could be transcribed either /peliʲa/ or /pella/, since in Linear B the spelling *-ra₂* alternates with *-ri-ja* and represents the outcome of a yodized geminate: /lla/ < /liʲa/ (Melena 2014: 66).

reconstruction *πέλια [pélia] > *πέλja [pélja] > πέλλα [pélla], with secondary yod /j/ in *πέλja developed from antevocalic unstressed /i/ (*πέλια) in allegro speech and doubling of consonant <λλ> before /j/ with simultaneous loss of /j/, yielding πέλλα). In similar situations, in the Thessalian dialect, to which, as noted, the word *πέλια / πέλλα belongs, the <ι> is sometimes retained and at other times omitted in spelling (and in pronunciation as well). This phenomenon is post-Mycenaean and persisted as late as the second century BCE.[52] Thus, besides πέλλα, the word πέλια could also have had a second form *πέλλῐα, with the <ι> preserved.[53]

A word homonymous with πέλλα "basin" exists in Greek; it is the adjective πέλλα referring to the grey colour of an object.[54] This word derives from the Indo-European root **pel-* "grey".[55] From the same root derives the word πέλεια [péle:a] (and πελειάς) "dove".[56] The term denotes the grey colour of the feathers of the dove (similarly in Latin: cf. *palumbes* "dove," from *palleo* "to be pale, grey"). From the same IE root **pel-* also derive the adjectives (oxytone) πελῐ́-ός, -ά, -όν and (paroxytone) πέλι-ος, -α, -ον (Hippocrates), and the *o*-grade πολιός, -α, ον used of elderly persons (Hdn. 1.123.16) with reference to grey hair.

From the above it can be concluded that the feminine noun πέλια "old, grey-haired woman", pronounced [pélia], could have been confused with *πέλ(λ)ῐα "basin", pronounced [pél(l)ia]. Indeed, this may be precisely the misunderstanding attributed to the Boeotians in Ephorus' narrative. According to the account, sometime after the Trojan War – that is, in modern chronological terms, during the Iron Age – an oracle was delivered to the Boeotians at Dodona by a priestess. This priestess most probably used the Thessalian dialect, since, according to Souidas (fourth century

[52] García-Ramón 1975: 99–100.

[53] The j may represent either an inherited primary yod */j/ or a glide /j/ arising from the non-syllabic realisation of /i/ before another vowel – an allegro development known as secondary yod. In Thessalian, secondary yod causes gemination of the preceding consonant, just as primary yod does in all dialects. In Thessalian, yod often continues to be written with <ι>: ἰδδιαν (IG IX.2 461b, second century BCE) < ἰδίαν (IG IX.2 102); πόλλιος (IG IX.2 258, second century BCE) < πόλιος (IG IX.2 61); προξεννία (IG IX.2 258.6, 9, Kierion, second century BCE) < προξενία; etc. Sometimes the <ι> is omitted, as in other dialects: κύρρος (IG IX.2 517) instead of *κυρριος, γυμνασσαρχεισαντα (IG IX.2 620) instead of *γυμνασσιαρχ- (Lejeune 1987: 173; Buck 1955: 26; Nieto Izquierdo 2018).

[54] πελλός, -ή, -όν (Hippocrates, Demosthenes, Theophrastus, Nicander, etc.) and πέλλος, -α, -ον (Aristotle), respectively; the accent varies in the manuscripts. Both words derive from πελιός / πέλιος.

[55] Beekes 2010 s.v. πέλεια. One etymological hypothesis for πέλεια holds that the term originally represented the feminine form of a u-stem adjective, namely *πελύς (masc.) 'grey' On this view, πέλεια would reflect an adjectival formation comparable to λίγεια (from masc. λιγύς) and ἐλάχεια (from masc. ἐλαχύς). See also Chantraine 1968 s.v. πέλεια.

[56] It occurs already in Homer in both paroxytone and oxytone forms.

BCE) (FGrHist 602 F 11 ap. Strabo 7.7.12. C 329) all the prophetesses in Dodona were descendants of Thessalian women. Although the oracle instructed the Boeotians to steal a cauldron – a *πέλ(λ)ῐα ([pél(l)ia]) – they misunderstood the term and instead abducted and killed a priestess, interpreting it as πέλια ([pélia]), 'a grey-haired woman'. Only after another priestess clarified the meaning of the oracle did they begin stealing cauldrons, which they subsequently sent as offerings to Dodona.

The confusion of *πέλ(λ)ια "basin" with πέλια "grey-haired woman" may nevertheless have survived in the story about the abduction of (elderly) priestesses from Egyptian Thebes by Phoenicians, as related by Herodotus and Strabo. The reference to Thebes may originally have denoted Thebes in Boeotia – the city said to have sent cauldron offerings to Dodona – but was reinterpreted as referring to Thebes in Egypt. This Egyptian localisation may have resulted from Herodotus' interpretation of the tradition. Accordingly, the Phoenician Cadmeans of Boeotia in the original narrative may have been mistakenly identified with Phoenicians who travelled to Egypt.

Some time later, the conditions for a second misinterpretation emerged. From the fifth century BCE onwards, long ⟨ι⟩ was often written as ⟨ει⟩ in Epirote and several other Greek dialects and vice versa. As a result, the use of ⟨ει⟩ in place of short ⟨ι⟩ is also attested in the epigraphic material from Epirus, including the Dodona inscriptions.[57] This accords with the testimony of Hesychius that the word πελίους "old" was written in Epirus as πελείους: "πελείους are called the old men and women in Cos and Epirus". Thus, in fifth-century BCE Epirus, *πέλια "basin" would have been written as πέλεια, making it formally identical to πέλεια "dove".[58] This homonymy could have produced ambiguity between "basin" and "dove".

My hypothesis is that such a confusion of *πέλια "basin" with πέλεια "dove" did arise and that it transformed the original account of the theft of cauldrons into the story of the "talking doves" that flew from Egypt to Dodona. This tradition is attested in Herodotus, who states that he heard it at Dodona, and may also be reflected in the iconography of a fourth-century BCE bronze coin of the Epirote League depicting three birds in a tree, as well as in later Roman accounts of the doves. This particular confusion between "basins" and "doves" could have arisen in Do-

[57] Cf. βέλτειον instead of βέλτιον, Διεί instead of Διί, τίνει instead of τίνι, etc.; Lhôte 2006: 387 and n. 49, according to whom the interchangeable use of ⟨ει⟩ and ⟨ι⟩ for long /i:/ inevitably gave rise to occasional confusion in the spelling of short /i/ too. Cf. Méndez Dosuna 2008: 63-64; Filos 2018: 236, no 55.

[58] It is possible that the confusion originated in a written rather than an oral source.

dona, probably around the fifth century BCE, as a result of the distinctive Epirote dialectal replacement of short <ι> with <ει>.

But why "talking" doves and not just doves? Numerous bronze tripods and cauldrons have been discovered at Dodona, dating from the eighth century BCE[59] and ancient authors describe the prophetic function of the sanctuary as connected with the sounds produced by bronze cauldrons: Menander (Men. fr. 66), Callimachus (Callim. *Hymn Del.* 277-287), Lucan (6.422–430), Aelius Aristides (Ael. Aristid. *In Defense of the Four* 672), Stephanus of Byzantium (Steph. Byz. s.v. Δωδώνη), who cites the proverb "Dodonaean bronze" (Δωδωναῖον χαλκίον) applied to excessively talkative persons. Thus, the original reference to the "talking cauldrons" – the resonant bronze cauldrons of Dodona, whose sound conveyed oracular responses[60] – was transformed through dialectal misunderstanding and phonetic convergence into the myth of "talking doves" delivering prophecies.

In conclusion, a dialectal term originally referring to cauldron offerings was reinterpreted through homonymy, generating divergent traditions: one ornithological (talking doves), the other anthropomorphic (abducted women).[61]

Boeotia and Libya

If the reasoning proposed here is accepted, then the "doves" said to have flown from Thebes to Libya were not birds at all, but tripod-cauldron offerings sent from Boeotia to North Africa during the Iron Age. I suggest that this narrative is connected with the Boeotian colonisation of Libya. There is literary evidence that, after the Trojan War, the Boeotians developed close relations with Libya. According to Herodotus (Hdt. 4.147-153), the Boeotians first colonised the island of Thera and subsequently Libya, where they founded Cyrene. The colonisation of Cyrene could have occurred as early as two generations after the Trojan War.[62] As discussed earlier, this is also the period during which the Boeotians fought

[59] Luce 2010: 28.

[60] For a new interpretation of the role of the bronze cauldrons in temples as musical instruments, see Harissis 2017.

[61] On the important role of polysemy and homonymy in the formation of other ancient mythical traditions, see Harissis 2014b; Harissis 2019.

[62] According to the genealogical tables, the hero Theras – who colonised the Aegean island that bears his name – lived eight generations after Cadmus. The colonisation of Libya, in turn, took place at least one generation after Theras – it is not clear exactly when this colonisation took place according to the ancient narratives – and therefore at least nine generations after Cadmus. Since Cadmus is traditionally placed seven generations before the Trojan War (Hard 2004: 337), it follows that the colonisation of Libya could have occurred two generations after the Trojan War. Modern scholars usually date the colonisation to the seventh century BCE, based exclusively on archaeological evidence.

the Pelasgians and consulted the oracle at Dodona.[63] Pausanias (Paus. 9.16.1) notes that Boeotia possessed a sanctuary of Ammon Zeus – mirroring the famous oracle of Ammon in Cyrene. Only two other such sanctuaries (at Sparta and Gytheio) existed on mainland Greece. Pindar himself, who was of Boeotian origin, spent some time in Cyrene (cf. Pind. *Pyth.* 4, 5, 9) and composed a hymn to Ammon Zeus (Pind. fr. 35). In his Paean (Rutherford F2 and S8), he appears to mention both Dodona and the migration motif, further suggesting that the Boeotian poetic tradition preserved awareness of these interconnected religious centres. Finally, linguistic evidence supports early connections between Boeotia and Cyrene.[64]

"Talking Birds" in Dodona

In the case of the misunderstanding of the word πέλλα ("bowl, cauldron") as πέλια ("old woman"), there is little difficulty in terms of integrating the resulting figure into Dodona's ritual tradition. "Old women" could easily be identified with the serving priestesses of the sanctuary, especially given the well-attested presence of female prophetesses there.

The situation is more complex in the case of the "talking doves". If, as I argue, this myth arose from the misinterpretation of πέλλα ("cauldron") as πέλεια ("dove") sometime around the fifth century BCE, then such a newly created motif could hardly have prevailed unless the image of the dove was compatible with Dodona's ritual landscape. A completely foreign symbol would not have been able to establish itself within a fixed cultic tradition.

It is therefore necessary to assume that certain pre-existing elements facilitated the natural integration of the "talking doves" into Dodonaean religious practice. In my view, three such elements made this development possible: the pre-existence of a nymph cult at Dodona, the wide-

[63] Additional narrative details reinforce this connection. Gouneus – who, according to the *Catalogue of Ships*, resided seasonally in Dodona and in Thessaly and participated in the Trojan expedition – settled in Libya after his return from Troy (Apollod. *Epit.* 6.15a). Heracles, who in some traditions is associated with both Thebes and Minyan Orchomenus, performed several of his labours in Libya.

[64] Buck 1955: 9. It is possible that the naval expeditions of the "Sea Peoples" into North Africa, as recorded in Egyptian sources of the twelfth century BCE, may correspond in part to the naval expeditions of the Boeotians to Libya. The "Sea Peoples" are different groups that appear in Egyptian inscriptions at the end of the Late Bronze Age, especially in the inscriptions of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu (Sandars 1985; Betancourt 2000). The Egyptians describe them as seaborne raiders or migrating populations who attacked Egypt and many parts of the eastern Mediterranean around 1200 BCE. They were not a single people, but rather a coalition or successive waves of different groups. Their origins remain much debated. Many scholars place some of these groups in the Aegean, western Anatolia, Crete, Sardinia, or southern Italy. According to modern scholars, some of the "Sea Peoples" can be identified with prehistoric Greek tribes. The "Denyen" have often been connected with the Danaans and the "Eqwesh" with the Achaeans.

spread Greek practice of ornithomancy and the introduction, in the fifth century BCE, of the cult of Aphrodite at Dodona. Taken together, these factors created a ritual environment in which the reinterpretation of πέλλα ("cauldron") as πέλεια ("dove") could be absorbed and stabilised within the sanctuary's tradition.

The Cult of Nymphs in Dodona

The nymphs were a category of female divinities conceived as youthful women inhabiting the natural landscape – groves, streams, caves, hills, and especially trees. Their connection with trees is already suggested in Homer (Hom. *Il*. 6.420) and described more explicitly in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (*h. Aphrod*. 257-272) as well as in a fragment of Pindar (Pind. fr. 165 Bergk). According to this tradition, a tree and a nymph were born simultaneously and shared the same life span: when the tree flourished, the nymph thrived; when the tree withered and decayed, the nymph likewise perished. Often described as daughters of Zeus or of river gods, they were frequently the focus of localised rural cults. Such a cultic framework corresponds well to what one would expect in a pastoral environment like that of early Dodona. Indeed, the cult of nymphs in Dodona is well attested (Callim. *Aet.* fr. 2.7, ap. Steph. Byz. s.v. Δωδώνη). A female divinity associated with the sanctuary was Dione, who was venerated alongside Zeus at Dodona.[65] Dione is mentioned in Hesiod (Hes. *Theog.* 353) and in Homer (Hom. *Il.* 5.370-417). In the Hesiodic tradition, Dione is counted among the Oceanids, daughters of Oceanus. The nymph Dodone, the eponymous figure of the sanctuary, was likewise considered an Oceanid.

Pherecydes (Pherecyd. fr. 46c) refers to Dodonaean nymphs, identified as Hyades, including Dione among them. Mousaios (Musae. fr. 88 Bernabé; cf. Pherecyd. fr. 90c) places the Hyades in Libya, thereby extending their geography into North Africa. Myrsilus of Methymna (Myrsil. Methymn. FGrHist 477 F 15) reports that the Hyades were daughters of Cadmus, further strengthening the link between Boeotia and Dodona. The Hyades at Dodona were considered the sisters of the Pleiades (Πλειάδες). One myth recounts that the *Pleiades* all killed themselves out of grief over the death of their sisters, the Hyades. Another explains that after seven years of being pursued by Orion, a Boeotian giant, they were turned into stars by Zeus. There is no explicit and unambiguous evidence for the presence of the nymphs Pleiades at Dodona. Still, it is possible that the cult of Boeotian nymphs, the Pleiades, arrived together with the cult of their

[65] Dione's sisters were likewise oracular goddesses: Phoibe possessed Delphi, Mnemosyne Lebadeia, and Themis both Delphi and Dodona. Dione was identified both with Phoibe and with Dodone, the eponym of the oracle.

sisters Hyades, in Dodona. Their name was occasionally rendered in poetic (lengthened) form as Πελειάδες (Hes. fr.177, 178, 179; Simonides fr. 50; Pind. *Nem*. 2.11; Alcm. 23.60; Eur. *Or*.1005) – a form that readily invited association with πελειάδες ("doves"). Indeed, ancient authors themselves appear to have encouraged such an etymological convergence (Aesch. fr. 312, as corrected by Radt; cf. Ath. *Deipn*. Book 11 Keibel 80). Thus, it is possible that the nymphs P(e)leiades may have been perceived at Dodona as nymphs transformed not into stars but into birds.

Ornithomancy

The second element that, in my view, permitted the natural integration of the "prophetic doves" – a motif that, as noted, is otherwise foreign to Greek cultic tradition – into the older religious framework of Dodona was the widespread Greek practice of ornithomancy, that is, divination through the observation of birds. In the *Odyssey* (20.243), for example, an eagle flying with a dead dove in its talons is interpreted as an omen. The arrival and departure of migratory birds were understood as seasonal indicators (Ar. *Av.* 719), and specific flight patterns were interpreted as signs of weather change. Ornithomancy is attested in Aeschylus (Aesch. *Sept.* 25), in Euripides – who calls birds "messengers of the gods" (Eur. ap. Plut. *De soll. an.* Stephanus page 975B1) – in Servius (Serv. *Aen.* 1.393 and 6.190), Dionysius of Halicarnassus (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom*. 1.14.15), and Celsus (ap. Origen *Cels.* 4.88). The words οἰωνός and ὄρνις denote both "bird" and "omen" already in Homer and Pindar. According to Pausanias (10.6.1), Parnassus, son of Poseidon, introduced ornithomancy at Delphi. The practice is also associated with figures such as Mopsus, while ancient authors were credited with treatises on ornithomancy.[66]

In Dodona, ornithomancy may have been introduced through the Trojan seer Helenus. Helenus, the twin brother of Cassandra, is said to have settled at Buthrotum in Illyria after the Trojan War (Teucr. fr. 1b ap. Steph. Byz. s.v. Βουθρωτός; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.51.1; Paus. 1.11.2). In Euripides' *Andromache* (Eur. *Andr*. 1245) Helenus is also portrayed as active in Epirus. Cassandra herself was considered the ancestor of the priestesses of Dodona, according to a third-century BCE inscription from Zakynthos found at Dodona. However, although many birds were considered prophetic in antiquity, pigeons were not typically regarded as mantic birds. At Delphi, for example, the croak of the raven and the cries of certain other birds (herons, trochili) were considered significant (Aesch. *Ag.* 58; Plutarch, *De Pyth. Or.* 405C-D). The pigeon is notably absent from the standard repertoire of mantic birds. Although pigeons were not traditionally regarded as prophetic birds, the broader practice of reading

[66] Bouché-Leclercq 1879 : 127-145.

divine signs from birds could have provided a conceptual framework within which the idea of "prophetic doves" could take root.

Aphrodite's Doves

A third element that facilitated the integration of the "prophetic doves" into the cult of Dodona was the introduction, in the fifth century BCE, of the cult of Aphrodite at the sanctuary.[67] Aphrodite had been associated with doves since at least the sixth century BCE.[68] Archaeological finds at Dodona dating to the fifth century BCE may be connected with the cult of Aphrodite, including figurines of doves.[69] While such figurines do not necessarily prove the existence of a specific dove cult, they indicate that the bird had acquired a symbolic presence within the sanctuary. It is also possible that the dove symbolism became linked with Dione – consort of Zeus at Dodona – whose figure could have overlapped, in later syncretic developments, with Aphrodite, who in the *Iliad* (*Il.* 5.370) is considered the daughter of Dione. In this religious environment, the assimilation of the "doves" into the cultic landscape of Dodona would have appeared natural rather than disruptive.

Conclusion

The original narrative was likely a Boeotian account describing the establishment of ritual ties between Thebes and two major oracles: Dodona in Epirus and Ammon in Libya. The narrative centred on the transport and dedication of tripod-cauldron offerings. A linguistic misunderstanding transformed this account. The Thessalian word *πέλ(λ)ια ("basin, cauldron") was reinterpreted as πέλεια ("dove" or "old woman"), thereby giving rise either to the myth of the Peleiades nymphs transformed into birds, or to that of literal doves flying from Thebes to Dodona and Libya. The dove imagery was further reinforced by the cult of Aphrodite at Dodona. This misunderstanding was already established by the time Herodotus visited Dodona. Thus, what began as a narrative about the dedication of cauldrons became, through linguistic convergence and religious adaptation, the enduring myth of the "prophetic doves".

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[67] Tzouvara-Souli 1979: 56.

[68] Cook 1940: 1016-1018 mentions an Archaic bronze mirror from Corinth, dated to the second half of the sixth century BCE, depicting Aphrodite holding a dove in her right hand. Her shrine at Eryx in Sicily was home to a large flock of doves (Ael. *HV* I.15 and *NA* 4.2; Athen. 394f).

[69] For the pigeon figurines discovered at Dodona, see Tzouvara-Souli 1979: 56. Bronze pigeons from Dodona were published by Carapanos 1878, vol. 1: 38; vol. 2, pl. 21 nos. 4, 4bis, 5, 5bis, though these examples are undated. Thompson (1982) mentions a bronze statuette from Dodona of a priestess holding a pigeon, which she dates to the fifth century BCE (cf. Schrader 1924: 152). She also mentions a bronze statuette from Dodona of a child holding a pigeon, dated to the late fourth century BCE.

General Conclusion

The evidence examined in this study suggests that the early history of Dodona should be reconsidered within a broader network linking Epirus, Thessaly, Boeotia, and Libya. Literary testimony, archaeology, ritual practice, and linguistic analysis converge on a coherent reconstruction. In the Late Bronze Age, Dodona may have been a highland meeting place embedded in transhumant pastoral circuits connecting the Pindus range with Thessaly. The Homeric *Catalogue of Ships* may preserve a memory of seasonal movement between Epirus and the Peneus valley in Thessaly. The Cadmian-Boeotian migration, as preserved in Ephorus and Thucydides, further points to sustained interaction between Thessaly and Dodona in the Iron Age. The ritual centrality of bronze tripods and cauldrons, archaeologically attested at Dodona from the eighth century BCE onward, corresponds closely with literary traditions describing their political and territorial symbolism. The "theft" and dedication of tripod-cauldrons may therefore be understood as acts of sovereignty and sacral legitimisation. Within this framework, the Boeotian-Libyan connection within the "doves" narrative may reflect Boeotian expansion to Cyrene.

The myth of the *peleiades* may be explained as the product of dialectal homonymy. The Thessalian term *πέλ(λ)ια / πέλλα ("basin, cauldron") was perhaps reinterpreted as πέλια or πέλεια ("old woman" or "dove"). From this linguistic convergence may have emerged two parallel strands: abducted priestesses and flying doves. These reinterpretations could readily take root because Dodona already possessed ritual elements that facilitated their assimilation – priestesses, nymph traditions, ornithomantic practice, and, in the fifth century BCE, the cult of Aphrodite with her sacred doves.

Thus, the "talking doves" may not originally have been birds, but bronze cauldrons. The acoustic environment of Dodona – the resonant clangour of tripod-cauldrons – may have contributed to the conception of the oracle's voice. Through phonetic misunderstanding and religious reinterpretation, resonant bronze vessels could have been transformed into prophetic birds. Dodona's mythology may therefore be understood as an amalgam of fossilised ritual practices, dialectal variation, and historical events.

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