

Ancient Divination and Resilience at the Sanctuary of Dodona

ABSTRACT

The focus of this essay lies on the ancient practice of divination, particularly on the consultation of oracles. Looking at a range of evidence from the oracular sanctuary of Dodona, my aim will be to show how a resilience perspective can be used to interpret the tablets of questions that were asked of the oracle between the 6th and 2nd centuries BCE. Looking, in particular, at agricultural problems such as possible crop failures, the expected amount of rain or the correct cultivation of the soil, the analysis builds on socio-ecological resilience theories in order to examine the extent to which oracles represented an institution that provided a ritualized framework for developing problem-solving strategies. In addition to aspects of the transmission and negotiation of knowledge, which undoubtedly played an important role in the context of oracle consultation, the project will also address the question of the performative aspects of communication with the respective gods and their social framing.

KEYWORDS

Resilience / socio-ecological resilience theory / environmental history / divination / ancient culture / agriculture / religion / gods / Dodona

In an oracle question tablet from the 4th century BCE, found at the sanctuary of Dodona in ancient Epirus (in the North-West of Greece), the

Corcyraeans and Oricians ask Zeus Naïos and Dione what god or hero they should sacrifice and pray to in order to live in their city best and most securely and in order to have fair crops and abundant crops and enjoyment of all the good crops.

[θε]ός· ἐπικοινωνῶνται τοὶ Κορκυ-
ραῖοι καὶ τοὶ Ὀρικοί τῶι Διὶ τῶι Ναϊ-
[ω]ι καὶ τῶι Διώναι, τίνοι κα θεῶν ἢ ἡ-
ρώων θύοντες καὶ εὐχ[ό]μενοι τὰ-

[ν] πόλ[ι]ν [κ]άλλιστα οἰκεύσεγ καὶ ἀσφα-
λέστατα καὶ εὐκαρπία σφιν καὶ πο-
λυκαρπία τελέθει καὶ κατόνασις παν-
τὸς τῶγαθοῦ καρποῦ¹.

While the first part of the question, beyond the attention it gives to the proper functioning and security of the city, undoubtedly attests to issues resulting from the integration of Orikos into the territory of Corcyra, the insistence on the term *karpos* (fruit, harvest, agricultural production) and its derivatives is no less remarkable: both communities appear to be con-

¹ SEG xxiii 474; Lhôte 2006 (= abbreviated LOD) 2. On this Eidinow 2007, 63-64. 350-351.

cerned not only with the quality and abundance of their harvests, but also with the full enjoyment they can derive from them. Looking at the 4,000 or so tablets from the Dodonian sanctuary, such concern seemed to motivate other consultants to the oracle².

This enquiry follows a well-known pattern in Greek history, where communities as well as individuals seek prescriptive advice on how to maintain a good relationship with higher powers and there is the possibility that it was prompted by an incident that the enquirers found irritating³. When looking at these questions, we get the impression that one primary role of oracles was to provide guidance on how to alleviate or be released from various calamities such as crop failure, but also plague, abnormal mortality rates among humans and animals, drought, unusually violent storms, and untimely hail and frost⁴. As one critic puts it, the material connected to oracular consultations »supports the idea that they (i. e. communities) were seeking answers to questions which they could not establish by other means« and that the oracles provided »certainty« because of their divine »authority«⁵. This is why scholars have widely held that, in ancient Greece, oracular consultations were a form of preventive measure, »a kind of prophylaxis against afflictions« of various kinds⁶. This view ties in with a general understanding of »divination« as a »valuable« tool to deal with stress »not because it makes objectively verifiable predictions of future events or diagnoses of the past causes of present problems, but because it helps [...] a society to resolve its current crises by generating an authoritative understanding of the current situation, its aetiology and opportunities for future action«⁷.

It is this understanding of divination as a social tool to process uncertainty and to overcome shocks

that makes the practice of divination an appropriate subject for bringing it together with resilience studies. Resilience theory has spread widely across various disciplines over the last decades. In general, resilience has been defined as the ability of a system to revert to a previous state after experiencing disturbance or crisis⁸. Other definitions stress adaptability and transformability as key factors and see resilience less as a teleological goal to strive for, with various normative aspects attached to it, but rather as a processual, open-ended dynamic, where contingency can play as much a role as the agency of the different actors involved in a system or socio-historical setting⁹. These latter approaches also underline the interpretative elements involved and problematize resilience as an attribution phenomenon, depending both on the perception of possible dangers or risks on part of the named actors and the analytical interest of researchers, who use a resilience framework for understanding (historical) processes¹⁰. In order to reflect on these various dimensions and to link them to the study of ancient divination, I want to test the applicability of the notion of resilience by looking at the sanctuary of Dodona. In the first part, I will discuss possible intersections between recent theoretical approaches to ancient divination and resilience theory (particularly socio-ecological and sociological ones). Focusing in particular on consultations of the oracle that revolved around the use of natural resources and farming activities, the second part will deal with the way the oracle was socio-culturally framed as a place where advice concerning these issues could be sought. In a final step, the consultation process and the way the questions of the consultants were formulated will be discussed in terms of their processual and relational dimensions in fostering resilience¹¹.

2 On the *peri karpōn*-motif see Lebreton 2019, 141.

3 Cf. Dillon 2017, 327.

4 Plutarch, an author of the 1st and 2nd c. CE, who was also a priest at the ancient oracle of Delphi, lists a number of everyday concerns that worshippers addressed in their inquiries: these involved, for instance, marriage, travel, and economic issues. Plutarch laments that the oracular sanctuary is now primarily used for private consultations whereas it had been visited by kings and commanders in the past. We should, however, note the rhetorical quality of the passage, cf. Plut. *De Pyth. or.* 28.408c.

5 Bowden 2013, 46.

6 Parker 1985, 304.

7 Anderson 2017, 51. For a similar take on the phenomenon see also Moustakis 2020, 193.

8 A good overview over different theoretical approaches in various disciplines is offered by Bollig 2014.

9 These aspects will be explored below. For a first orientation cf. Endreß 2015, 533-535, who uses a social-constructivist approach that will also be of great interest in this paper.

10 For the integration of historical perspectives and the different interpretive frameworks at play in historical resilience research see in general the contributions in Endreß et al. 2020. The resilience concept dates back to the 19th c., but it took decades until it was used in different disciplines. It came to particular prominence in ecology in the 1970s, when Crawford »Buzz« Holling introduced the idea that the prevalent static equilibrium center views of ecosystems, which held that »nature« would return to an equilibrium after the removal of exogenous stressors, was problematic when considering the transient behavior of systems that were not balanced (Holling 1973).

11 On the latter aspect cf. also Rampp 2020.

Divination and Resilience

In general, divination is one of the oldest forms of human knowledge- and decision-making practices. It encompasses all methods »by which knowledge is obtained of the future or of anything whose significance cannot be determined by ordinary perception, a means of extending the realm of rationality«¹². In its social function, divination can be seen as a method for contemplating potential futures and addressing uncertainty, aiming to make sense of situations that defy typical understanding¹³. This perspective regards divination and the consultations of oracles as tools for resolving intricate problems by eliminating disorder and reaching a consensus in favor of a specific solution. There were myriad forms of divination in antiquity and it was a common practice affecting all groups of society. At oracular sanctuaries like Delphi or Dodona it was possible to consult a particular god or a hero¹⁴. While there were many oracles all around the Mediterranean Sea and worshippers sometimes travelled vast distances for their consultation of a particular oracle (or, indeed, a number of them), most oracles like Dodona attracted a regional clientele¹⁵ – and there were certainly people who went to these sanctuaries relatively frequently. There were also those that were unable to travel, who might in turn consult an itinerant diviner. And although much of the research has focused on the oracles' (or diviners') answers, the larger social context as such, and especially the problems of the consultants that prompted the visit of an oracle, had for a long time only played a secondary role in the discussion.

The publication of ca. 4,000 so-called *lamellae* from the ancient sanctuary of Dodona has provided material from which it becomes possible to shed a new light on the ancient practice of consultation.

Recording, for the most part, the questions that were asked of the oracle that may have played a role in the oracular process and that were used from the 6th to perhaps the mid-2nd century BCE¹⁶, these tablets reveal the perceived difficulties inherent in their life experiences and shed light on how they endeavored to navigate the uncertainties of everyday life. As Parker notes, »the material from Dodona gives us direct access to the concerns of enquirers entirely free from narrative exploration; and the great mass of it, consisting of enquiries from private individuals, surely gives us a much more accurate business of a Greek oracle« than other sources¹⁷. However, the tablets are often fragmentary and difficult to read and to date; some consist solely of single words and do not contain any useful information for critical analysis¹⁸. And while the question »how the oracle dealt with the most delicate among these enquiries, and thus how it functioned as a social institution, remains largely obscure«¹⁹, there is no denying that the tablets have great value for our analysis of many socio-historical, cultural, and religious aspects of ancient Greek life – including the understanding of why ancient Greek men and women turned to oracles in the first place.

Recent theories stress the communicative and relational character of divinatory practices, underlining that divinatory mechanisms are effective only to the extent that they provide clients with a meaningful approach to address their questions and their »performative ability to help people through difficult situations«²⁰. For instance, Graw sees divinatory consultation as a highly interactional and especially relational undertaking – not solely between diviner and consultant, but one that extends to the

¹² Wardle 2006, 1. Divination is, as Zeitlyn notes, a »stepping-stone between pondering a problem and acting to resolve it, whether by ritual action or otherwise« (Zeitlyn 2001, 225).

¹³ Anderson 2017, 62.

¹⁴ Cf., in general, Johnston 2008. A good introduction is also Rosenberger 2001.

¹⁵ Cf. Eidinow 2014, 64.

¹⁶ The question of chronology has been taken up by numerous studies, but so far no clear picture has emerged, especially when considering the contents of the tablets and how concerns may have developed or changed over time. It will not be taken into account in my analysis here. Cf. on this Hinsch 2022, 436-441. Tablets have been found in different excavations at the site, but due to different reasons the publication has not been completed (see Parker 2016, 71-72). The most extensive publication came out only in 2013 (Dakaris et al. 2013), comprising two volumes and 4,216 tablets of varying quality (= abbreviated DVC). Cf. Chaniotis 2017, 51; Martín González 2021, 204-205; Moustakis 2020, 184-185 and Hinsch 2022, 425-426. Earlier publications include Lhôte 2006 (= abbreviated LOD, see note 1) and Eidinow 2007. It is estimated that 4,000 tablets still await

publication. For online publications of some of these inquiries see Dodona Online (DOL), with the »Choix d'inscriptions oraculaires de Dodone« (CIOD): <https://dodonaonline.com>.

¹⁷ Parker 2016, 71.

¹⁸ Cf. Chaniotis 2017, 51-52.

¹⁹ Parker 2016, 90.

²⁰ Anderson 2017, 62. These insights were, in part, influenced by recent anthropological explorations of divination that have moved beyond functionalist takes on the phenomenon. Although not denying the merits of functionalist accounts, these approaches are particularly interested in exploring the specific cultural properties of divination that distinguish it from other social decision-making processes and systems of knowledge, focusing on aspects of embodiment, imagination and performance in divinatory rituals. Highlighting the »consultational« quality of divination in particular, Graw asks whether it is not divination's »capacity as a cultural institution to address, deal with, and counter existential personal situations, ranging from illness and marital conflicts to unemployment and migration, in perhaps a unique way« that has made it a meaningful practice over the ages and across cultures (Graw 2009, 93; emphasis original).

»divinatory apparatus« itself and involves the specific frameworks in which the consultation takes place²¹. Divination thereby both reflects the »lifeworld« in which it is practiced and, at the same time, is a means of expressing it: »Divinatory knowledge systems have been formed over time and constitute a repository of insights into the existential dimension of life in a specific socio-cultural environment«²².

The latter aspect, which highlights the processual quality of the divinatory dialogue, also brings us to the question of how our analytical frameworks try to make sense of ancient practice by bringing heuristical models and conceptual questions to bear on our source material. One fruitful modern research agenda is to approach the ancient material from a perspective that attempts to view oracle consultations as expressions of »risk« and »uncertainty«. As, for instance, Esther Eidinow has demonstrated in her 2007 monography »Oracles, Curses, and Risk Among the Ancient Greeks« oracle consultation served as a pivotal strategy through which common individuals in ancient Greece, both independently and collectively, navigated and addressed uncertainties and risks in their daily lives. Eidinow, adopting a social-constructivist perspective on »risk«, contends that diverse societies and various factions within a society interpret, elucidate, and confront uncertainties about the future, particularly future threats or risks, in distinctive ways. According to her viewpoint, individuals who sought guidance from oracles were grappling with uncertainty and sought assurance in making the correct decisions²³.

The particular added value of Eidinow's approach lies in demonstrating how the »perception« of issues connected to different aspects like travel, marriage or health prompted oracular consultation and in how far these enquiries were, in turn, shaped by the particular socio-cultural contexts in which one turned to an oracle sanctuary to resolve questions. Tying these observations back to the conceptual framework of risk, »this indicates, in turn, that knowledge about risk is bound to the socio-cultural contexts in which this knowledge is generated«. In general, this means that risk perception is both tied

to the immediate historical context and the threats of the lifeworld, but also that it shapes »culture, informing relationships, and influencing the development of institutions, even creating the potential for further risk«. Quite in accord to what we underlined with regard to resilience theory above, we can differentiate varying analytical perspectives in relation to our research interest: »In its modern setting, the theory of the social construction of risk attempts to explain the modern prevalence of certain discourses of »risk«, but at its conceptual level it provides a way of describing how societies engage with the unknown future«²⁴. The practice of oracle consultation, its age-old tradition, along with the stories connected to it, can thus be seen as a central socio-cultural strategy that was used to deal with this unknown future and to anticipate developments that had yet to take place.

Viewed through an environmental-historical lens, the quest for reliable food sources was such a significant concern that occupied individuals across social strata. The Greeks grappled with the management of natural resources to ensure a secure livelihood for the future. As I want to suggest, the oracle system discussed here can be understood as a communicative social arena where individuals or social groups engaged in discussions and negotiations surrounding these pressing questions. This ties in with recent discussions of Dodona that see the sanctuary as a polyfunctional site, as the nodal point in a »network for the exchange on goods and services«. In this context, as Chapinal-Heras argues, »sanctuaries surely played a prominent role because they were safe spaces where divergent collectives would find easier (ways) to get in contact and interact«. Building, in part, on Finley's argument, that »agriculture and stockbreeding (are) the main economic activities in a self-sufficient system«²⁵, this view brings into focus the wider social-ecological context in which a sanctuary like Dodona was situated. For the people consulting the oracle, farming and animal husbandry were two central economic activities and the survival of the communities depended – to a large degree – on the success of these activities. As I would

21 Graw 2009, 104. Building on other anthropological studies that have emphasized the »dialogic« character inherent in ethnographic encounter and that have analyzed, at the same time, the relationship between different groups in social settings where performance plays a role, Zeitlyn sees divinatory consultation primarily as a dialogic, reciprocal process, whose meaning is negotiated rather than predetermined by fixed rules or the diviner's or medium's answer. In these approaches, divination appears as a specific mode of (self-)reflective reasoning with tangible effects on the lifeworld. Cf. on this also Wilce, who offers »an interpretation of divination as dialogic, interactive and always potentially unsettling« (Wilce 2001, 190) by looking at various dimensions of Bangladeshi divination that emerge out

of specific consultations. That Graw's statement does not only hold true for the »answers« given in consultation processes, but also extends to the questions of the consultants has been shown in multiple other anthropological studies (see, for instance, Zeitlyn 2001, 236-237). For a comprehensive and critical discussion of the limits and possibilities of anthropological theories and the study of ancient Greek forms of divination see Maurizio 1995.

22 See Graw 2009, 104-105.

23 Cf. Eidinow 2007.

24 Eidinow 2007, 20-22.

25 Chapinal-Heras 2021, 208; with Finley 1973.

claim, it is within this particular context in which the consultation of an oracle could function as a crucial medium for cultivating resilience.

As the forerunner of recent ecological and socio-ecological resilience theories, Crawford »Buzz« Holling, argued, the prevalent static equilibrium center views of ecosystems, which held that »nature« would return to an equilibrium after the removal of exogenous stressors, was problematic when considering the transient behavior of systems that were not balanced. Rather, he conceptualized resilience as the capacity to persist within multiple stability domains in the face of change: according to him, »resilience determines the persistence of relationships within a system and is a measure of the ability of these systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, and still persist«²⁶. As Folke puts it in his discussion of the outlooks introduced by the concept, »the resilience perspective shifts policies from those that aspire to control change in systems assumed to be stable, to managing the capacity of social-ecological systems to cope with, adapt to, and shape change«. As he adds, a management perspective of resilience »enhances the likelihood of sustaining desirable pathways for development in changing environments where the future is unpredictable and surprise is likely«²⁷. This management perspective in particular can be used to analyze seemingly self-sufficient systems and the kind of economy and exchange processes that have been analyzed for Dodona and Epirus.

The important aspect here is, however, not that oracles are understood as institutions that provide ready answers and neat solutions to all problems that may arise in such a system, but that an oracle can rather be seen as a place of community interaction. Here, people came together, exchanging their experiences and knowledge as well as communicating their worries. In this context, Chapinal-Heras has underlined the sanctuary's function as a hub for knowledge exchange. What is important to note here is that while the oracle's responses were not in-

fallible, they had to be reasonably accurate for the sanctuary to maintain its reputation. Conversely, individuals did not necessarily lose faith in oracles solely due to incorrect answers. This was particularly true if they believed their own actions were inappropriate or if they subscribed to the idea that deities acted based on their whims, making their decisions subject to change²⁸. The point of the resilience perspective sketched out so far is that it brings the social dimension of resilience processes into swift focus and in that it »foregrounds the limits to predictive knowledge and insists on the prevalence of the unexpected«²⁹. It also underlines the necessity to have »knowledge of past events« and their trajectory in order to make appropriate assessments of »comparative risk scenarios«³⁰. The ability »to learn from past experiences, and to accept that some uncertainties must inevitably be faced« are crucial here³¹. In this context, »social capital (including trust and social networks) and social memory (including experience and dealing with change)« have been analyzed as features of social resilience³². Another key capacity, in social contexts, is the »ability to anticipate danger«³³, but not in the sense of an exact prediction of the future – rather, this mode of anticipation consists not in »the presumption of sufficient knowledge«, as Holling formulated in ecological models, but the recognition of our ignorance: not the assumption that future events are expected, but that they will be unexpected«³⁴. The display of »unknowing« that we find in many of the tablets as regards the not-too distant future and the unforeseeable ways of the natural world, can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the »unexpected« as a property built into the lifeworld³⁵ – one that could be understood and accepted by discursively invoking the human interdependency with the nonhuman world and the gods.

In socio-historical resilience studies, religion has, in consequence, played an important role in order to assess how past societies have made sense of crises. These studies have stressed the »processual aspect« inherent in social resilience. As Haldon and

²⁶ Holling 1973, 17.

²⁷ Folke 2006, 254. 261. This view was further developed in later studies and interdisciplinary frameworks, where the theory was adapted to social systems, especially with regard to »understanding the social dimension for dealing with uncertainty and change in resource and ecosystems dynamics, including organizational and institutional flexibility and social capital and conflict«. While the transfer of the concept to social systems has not been univocally welcomed, it can be meaningfully adapted as long as the political components, social dynamics (for instance, distributive consequences) and cultural patterns of the perception of change and the negotiation of uncertainty are taken into account (cf. Bollig 2014, 271-276).

²⁸ Chapinal-Heras 2021, 172. On the pervasive presence of »luck« in the enquiries and the way ancient Greeks understood and dealt with consultations see Eidinow 2019; on the success and principles of divination at oracles see also Parker 1985, 299-300

²⁹ Walker/Cooper 2011, 6.

³⁰ Haldon et al. 2020, 287.

³¹ Redman/Kinzig 2003.

³² Folke 2006, 254.

³³ Hannig 2016, 244.

³⁴ Holling 1973, 21. Although the management approach to resilience is characterized by a certain degree of openness, there is, especially when applied to societies in historical contexts, an attribution of resilience that can »present developments as though people at the time were conscious of a larger picture«, with resilience thought of as a kind of teleological goal with a defined pattern of risk perception, ensuing action, and final results.

³⁵ On this see Schliephake forthcoming.

Rosen note, for resilience to be »heuristically useful« in historical analysis, »it needs to take into account as much as can be known about mentalités, about attitudes and beliefs, about the ›world view‹ of the cultures in question«. Although the authors add that this approach is not without difficulties, it is essential insofar as social practice, and the ability to react effectively to changes in circumstances, are also built into the »thought-world«. In this context, the world of beliefs of a particular culture is central, because »beliefs respond to perceptions of the world as much as they represent a narrative about the world: a dynamic interaction that implies conjuncture and contingency«³⁶. In addition to the processual aspect at work, we are therefore also confronted with a constructivist perspective, which deals with the ways in which past societies have perceived threats, what kind of knowledge they created or built on to counter them, and how that affected their self-image.

This is why Endreß argues that the analysis of »perceptions, interpretations and knowledge stocks which achieved interpretive force within society and how this occurred« is particularly important if we want to understand »the ideas or key ideas and interpretive models on which actors draw to identify all of the phenomena that become relevant within the conceptual framework of resilience«³⁷. This processual and constructivist perspective is tied to relationality, as Rampp observes, not only because

we have to take account of the relationships of the historical actors and how they interact, but also because »we make methodological decisions about the status and character of our object of interest« as researchers³⁸. As Redman notes, what is at stake in socio-historical analysis is »that space and time are not the only scales«, but that the »organizational level should be viewed independently as a third level«: »They key is that humans, as individuals and as arranged into higher-level organizational units are self-reflective – evaluating where they and their system are«³⁹. I would claim that this understanding of resilience as formulated in sociological and socio-historical studies on resilience offers a useful heuristical framework for applying it to ancient divination, because this practice was closely tied to the social and religious world of the people on the one hand, and it gave them the opportunity to reflect on the risks of their lifeworld and on possible solutions to these problems on the other. They found ways of articulating and communicating their worries and uncertainties together with other consultants (who may have shared their troubles) and could do so in close ritual communion with higher powers. Looking at a range of evidence from the oracular sanctuary of Dodona, my aim in the next part will be to show how a resilience perspective can be used to interpret the tablets of questions that were asked of the oracle between the 6th and 2nd centuries BCE.

Ancient Dodona and Natural Resources

In order to start our discussion, let us return to the enquiry by the communities of the Corcyraeans and Oricians mentioned above. As already stated, it was by no means exceptional. It consisted in a re-assurance as regards the appropriate gods that needed to be honored to prevent calamities and to ensure that »the ritual system was in order«⁴⁰. The way divination worked here was clearly as »a guide to action, not as a means of stripping the veil from the future to satisfy simple curiosity«⁴¹. This also means that despite the apparent uncontrollability of the environmental and climatic factors that would affect the harvest yields, the spread of disease or the sudden

shock of a »natural« catastrophe, the kind of question posed also left room for action in the cultic realm: the communities would learn about which of the gods (or heroes) to honor in order to appease possible divine wrath (which was always a lingering threat in the Greek polytheistic system) and to secure divine assistance. The consultants both expressed their realization that natural and supernatural forces had »agency« that could affect their own world and, at the same time, that their decision to consult an oracle was a self-conscious, reflective action on their part. Even if the answers given by the oracle did not meet their expectations or failed to

³⁶ Haldon/Rosen 2018. This observation holds significance as it guides our attention towards the »patterns of belief« and the »thought world« within the socio-cultural system, forming part of a complex network of causal relationships. Although these elements are not static and cannot fully explain human agency in historical developments, the understanding of beliefs and their integration into the broader context of concepts and tacit knowledge plays a crucial role in shaping the boundaries and facilitators for individuals' responses and reactions to their environment.

³⁷ Endreß 2015, 541-542.

³⁸ Cf. Rampp 2019, 71-73.

³⁹ Redman 2005, 74.

⁴⁰ Parker 2016, 74.

⁴¹ Parker 1985, 299.

alleviate their worries, they could still feel that they had done something – and it could make them think about further ritual practices that would benefit their relationship with the gods.

The concern for the good life and for the immediate circumstances of the future did not, however, relate solely to cultic concerns by communities, but also encompassed the lifeworld of the individual. In a tablet from the early 4th century BCE, a couple write:

(God. The consultants ask the oracle about) their own health, (their safety), the abundance of their harvest, (and), I (the father), ask if the descendants I have (will be saved).

[θεός. περί ὑ]γείας αὐτῶν/[καὶ ἀσφαλεί]ας καὶ πολυκαρπίας/[καὶ σωτηρί]α μοι γενεᾶς/[ἐσσει]ται τᾶς ἔχω⁴².

While the enquiry does not address the question what kind of deity to honour, the need behind the consultations is the same: it concerns the general quality of life, including health (for oneself and one's offspring) as well as the important aspect of the supply of food. What is striking about the way the question is formulated is that there is a discernible switch in how it is phrased⁴³: what starts out, in indirect style, as an expression of worry about the fate of the couple, then, switches to direct style, in which the father worries about the survival of his children – a recurring problem in the tablets and a potent reminder of the high infant mortality rate in antiquity. The areas of concern listed in the enquiry are closely related, of course, and the expression of an ever-present insecurity with regard to harvest yields or food supplies is of utmost importance for survival and health of the entire family. Thus, it is not surprising that a considerable part of the private as well as communal inquiries revolved around the topic whether the earth or the arable soil would yield enough fruit⁴⁴. The kind of questions asked by the Corcyraeans and the couple can be seen as both an attempt at a prophylaxis against the prevalent danger of bad harvests and unproductive soils and the conviction that Dodona was the right place to turn to for the expression of their uncertainty.

Why did so many Greeks turn to oracles in order to find out about the expected harvest? Part of the answer lies in how natural produce was framed

in ancient Greek culture. In a comprehensive exploration of religion and »sustainability« in ancient Greece, Scheer highlights a key aspect in archaic Greek epic (particularly that of Hesiod) – the theme of resource scarcity⁴⁵. In his epic *Works and Days*, for instance, Hesiod not only addresses the scarcity of resources in his own time, but also concerns himself with the well-being of future generations. This perspective extends beyond Hesiod's writings to encompass archaic and classical Greek culture as a whole. The primary entities involved in such matters were the gods, especially when facing challenges like resource shortages, drought, crop failure, and hunger. Within Greek culture, a sense of duty and reverence towards the gods played a crucial role in this regard. People acknowledged specific deities responsible for various aspects based on local traditions and widely known myths depicting the gods' deeds. These myths, along with the associated religious practices or cults, significantly influenced individual attitudes. According to Scheer, there existed a religious marking of natural resources within Greek culture. The intertwining of myth, cults, and individual beliefs shaped behaviors towards the utilization and preservation of these resources⁴⁶.

To a large degree, the stories connected to oracles circulated in the oral tradition and were the subject of re-telling⁴⁷. As Kindt has suggested⁴⁸, they can be seen as narratives with a strong normative dimension, reflecting on appropriate social as well as religious behavior. We may see this in a story told towards the end of the ninth and final book of Herodotus' *Histories*. Herodotus relates a legend from the colony of Apollonia (founded by Corcyra) in southern Illyria⁴⁹: the community possessed a sacred flock dedicated to the Sun. Wealthy or noble townsmen took turns watching over it at night. One of them, Evenius, the appointed guardian, fell asleep, and wolves killed many of the flock. Instead of reporting the incident, he planned to replace them. When discovered, he was judged by the community and blinded for neglecting his duty. However, the town soon faced consequences – their flocks stopped reproducing, and the land became barren. Consulting the oracle at Dodona (and Delphi⁵⁰), they learned they angered the gods by unjustly blinding Evenius. To lift the curse, they were instructed to make restitution according to his wishes. The story problematizes

⁴² DVC 2279A.

⁴³ Cf. on this the comment by Lhôte on https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/dvc_2279a.pdf (18.9.2024).

⁴⁴ Fertility concerning the fields as well as human offspring both re-surface in the tablets as well as narrative sources, cf. Dieterle 2007, 47-48; with Eurip. f. Arch. 228.

⁴⁵ Cf. on this Scheer 2019 with Hes. Erg. 363. 376-378. 692; also Schliephake forthcoming.

⁴⁶ Scheer 2019, 23.

⁴⁷ On this cf. Maurizio 1997, 312.

⁴⁸ Kindt 2001, 34-38 on Hdt. 9,93,1-95.

⁴⁹ On the story see also Chapinal-Heras 2021, 161-162.

⁵⁰ On the double consultation see Piccinini 2018, 172.

the interconnection between the use of nonhuman resources (in this case animals) and social norms of appropriate behavior, including the kind of conflicts that could come from a negligent handling of them – and from what could be (in hindsight) interpreted as an affront to the gods.

Although there is a threat of a bias in our source material, it seems that Dodona was a place where questions concerning natural resources were posed rather often. Regarding the environmental aspects of consultations at Dodona, the connection becomes evident in the way the oracle was portrayed as a central religious institution intricately linked to the land itself in cultural forms of representation. As I want to suggest, this provided the sanctuary with great symbolical authority and socially framed it as a place where advice could be sought. According to ancient tradition, Dodona was one of the oldest, maybe the oldest of all ancient oracles⁵¹. It was dedicated to Zeus Dodonaios and his consort Dione⁵². The shrine of Dodona was situated on a high plain along important communication and commercial routes⁵³, with a connection by land to Thessaly, but also to southern Greece via routes along the Ionian Sea. As Piccinini puts it, »the region was certainly a frontier, but a very permeable one, where men, goods, and ideas circulated from a very early time around (the) pivot (of) Dodona«⁵⁴. Votive offerings from the south of Greece at Dodona can be dated to the end of the 8th century BCE and can be traced through the succeeding periods until Hellenistic times⁵⁵. It has been suggested that Dodona functioned as a kind of early landmark in transhumance circuits⁵⁶ that

can be traced back to the Bronze Age⁵⁷. From what we know, Dodona did attract worshippers from far away, but was mostly visited by locals or people living in relatively close proximity to the sanctuary⁵⁸. The early communal structure around the oracle was characterized by semi-nomadic tribes⁵⁹ and while it is hard to identify any dominating group there is little doubt that »the cult of Dodonian Zeus spread across Epirus, [...] supported by and reinforcing the role of Dodona as the political and cultural centre of the region«⁶⁰. The earliest urban structures in the vicinity of the sanctuary date from the 4th century BCE, the century believed to have witnessed the greatest degree of urbanization in the area and also the first monumentalization at the oracle⁶¹– until then (and also after this) Dodona’s oracle remained an open-air sanctuary and the consultants would have experienced its natural surroundings in an intricate way⁶².

Arguably, the most famous landmark connected to Dodona was the oak tree and it stood in a metonymical relationship to the oracle, both in pictorial as well as written sources⁶³. According to one foundational myth, a local shepherd attempted to fell the tree, but was dissuaded by a talking dove that nested in its branches. After this, an oracle was founded at this spot⁶⁴. A fragment of Hesiod gives the most extensive description of the oracular site preserved from the Archaic period⁶⁵. What we can take away from the fragment is not only that people were expected to bring gifts/offerings to the site (underlining its economic function), but also that the oracle’s setting is rendered as a pastoral one. Indeed, Dodona

⁵¹ See Hdt. 2,52,2. On the interplay of the foundational myths and the material realities of the site see Eidinow 2007, 56-63; 2014, 58-59. 68-71. In general cf. also Moustakis 2020, 181-182.

⁵² On Dione see Bosman 2017, 70 as well as Dieterle 2007, 45-47.

⁵³ Cf. on this aspect in particular Chapinal-Heras 2021, 134-151.

⁵⁴ Piccinini 2017, 31.

⁵⁵ Cf. Dieterle 2007, 169-234.

⁵⁶ Cf. Eidinow 2014, 62; Piccinini 2017, 34-40.

⁵⁷ On the role of shepherds, also concerning the commercial routes to and from Dodona see Chapinal-Heras 2021, 134-135. On the animal-shaped votives deposited at the site, usually interpreted as a reflection of the economic activities like stockbreeding see Chapinal-Heras 2021, 176. On this also Piccinini 2017, 36-38.

⁵⁸ Cf. Moustakis 2020, 186.

⁵⁹ Cf. Eidinow 2014, 62.

⁶⁰ Eidinow 2014, 64.

⁶¹ Cf. Piccinini 2016, 152-153; Moustakis 2020, 193-201.

⁶² For a discussion of the experiential dimension, especially with regard to »nature« see Angliker 2021, 39-40 and Piccinini 2016, 154. On the »bonds with nature« also Chapinal-Heras 2021, 191. 224.

⁶³ Although we do not know how divination worked at Dodona, many narrative sources suggest that the oak played a fundamental role in the consultation process. Rosenberger interprets the oak both as the material manifestation of the connection between above/sky and below/earth: While the trunk and crown spreads above the earth, the root system grows below

(Rosenberger 2001, 136). Not relying so much upon monumentalization, the oak presented a powerful cultural symbol that was firmly rooted in the very earth the local communities relied upon. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus consulted Zeus’ will from the »high crested oak« (Hom. Od. 14,327). Dieterle lists all of the literary concerning Dodona in her appendix (Dieterle 2007, 277-341; for coins and their symbols *ibid.* 56). The bark could, at least, also be the subject of inquiries, cf. DVC 2519B+2518A. On coins and how they depict the various elements associated with the oracle, especially the oak and the doves see the comments in Angliker 2021, 42 and Piccinini 2016, 167. See, in general, also the discussion in Zepernick 2020, 39-56.

⁶⁴ Cf. Parke 1967, 35-40 on stories connected to the oak and the doves; on the myth also Eidinow 2014, 69 and Chapinal-Heras 2021, 209. The connection between the tree and *peleiai*, female doves (possibly referring to priestess called »Doves«), was an established trope in the narrative sources (cf. Johnston 2008, 63-64). It might be possible that the rustling of the leaves of the tree was interpreted by the priestesses, who managed the sanctuary from the 5th c. BCE onwards (cf. Soph. Trach. 171-172), or that the oak’s bark may have played a role in the process. It has been noted that a unique species of wood pigeon still inhabits the area today, nesting in tall trees and emitting sounds that resemble human voices. Cf. Angliker 2021, 46.

⁶⁵ Hes. f. 134 Rzach. Chapinal-Heras refers to the myths surrounding the sanctuary and its surrounding »as a case of constructing landscape through language« (Chapinal-Heras 2021, 191).

sets itself apart from many other regions in Greece through its moderate Mediterranean climate and is situated in an area rich in vegetation, featuring coniferous forests, elevated grazing pastures, cereal fields, and olive groves. There can be no doubt that shepherding and stockbreeding was the most important economic activity there overall⁶⁶. Pausanias, a post-classical author, recounts a story related to the sacred women of Zeus and Dione at Dodona, suggesting that they were the first to utter chants emphasizing Zeus's eternal presence and the Earth's role in providing a harvest⁶⁷. This ritualistic incantation vividly illustrates the nexus between the oracle and the Earth's fertility, likely originating from agrarian practices, possibly associated with the Naia festival⁶⁸ and rain magic. The Naia were autumnal celebrations that honored the deity residing within the *hiera oikia* structure⁶⁹, commemorating Zeus' presence in Dodona. Significantly, the Naia occurred in the calendar following the return of shepherds and their flocks in winter-fallowing areas⁷⁰.

Though speculative, the ancient connection between Zeus' epithet »Naios«⁷¹ and water suggests a plausible tie between the worship of Zeus and Dione at Dodona and elements emphasizing the needs of an agrarian society, particularly the reliance on fertile soil and ample rainfall. In a sociocultural context, this cultic dimension, marked by regular festivals, offerings, sacrifices, and prayers, symbolically

positioned Dodona as a place safeguarding access to natural resources in the face of environmental uncertainties. As in particular Lebreton has shown, Zeus was – along with Gaia, Demeter and Dionysos – the primary deity who was invoked as *Karpophoros*, safeguarding the productivity of the harvest and the fertility of the fields. Both in terms of the epithets connected to Zeus as well as the documentary evidence related to oracular inquiries, the term *karpos* reappears regularly across the Greek world. Zeus function as a weather god may have played an important role here – and these associations resonate strongly in the material connected to Zeus Dodonaios⁷². While there were predictable cycles in nature, the certainty of favorable environmental conditions for farming during a specific season remained unclear. Religious performances at Dodona implicitly addressed this delicate interplay between the natural world and human cultivation, establishing a framework to express not only fear but also expectations and hope. The enduring tradition of the oracle, accompanied by consistent narratives, reinforced the belief that hope for better times or survival was not baseless. The community of worshippers at Dodona continued to gather, articulating enduring sentiments. This, coupled with accumulated environmental knowledge through oral and written interactions, became an invaluable resource for navigating environmental crises.

Consulting the Oracle, Fostering Resilience

The stories about and cultural representations of oracles (and divinatory practice) in ancient Greek communities that we just discussed offered an important imaginative framework that helps us understand why these stories circulated and why the practices associated with them were a long-standing social institution: not only did they convey information about how to approach an oracle, for instance, but they may be viewed as forms of media that provide users with more than just an intellectual por-

trayal of reality. Instead, they often offer an immersive experience encompassing physical, mental, and emotional dimensions of alternative future possibilities. This is an aspect that is important for discussing why the questions posed can be read from a resilience perspective. As scholars have suggested, imagining different possibilities was a central aspect involved in the consultation process (and it could be meaningfully recreated in storytelling), so that the consultant had already explored their choices

⁶⁶ On this see Chapinal-Heras 2021, 208-210.

⁶⁷ Paus. 10,12,10. Cf. Bosman 2017, 71. It has been suggested that, just like at Delphi, Gaia (Earth) was worshipped at Dodona before Zeus. Cf. Angliker 2021, 41 and Quantin 2008, 40.

⁶⁸ The Naia festival was possibly introduced in the 4th or 3rd c. BCE, but it could most likely look back to longer traditions. Chapinal-Heras calls it an »important setting for the exchange of ideas and knowledge« (Chapinal-Heras 2021, 174).

⁶⁹ On the architecture of the sanctuary since the 4th c. BCE see Piccinni 2016, 154-165.

⁷⁰ On this see in particular Quantin 2008, 28-40.

⁷¹ On the meaning of Naios see Dieterle 2007, 41-42, particularly on the suggestion to translate the epithet as »belonging to the water«. Usually it is translated as »resident«, cf. also Quantin 2008, 29-33.

⁷² As Lebreton argues, it is unlikely, however, that in its response to the Corcyreans and Oricians, the Dodonian oracle would have referred to gods by means of epithets derived from *karpos*, since the cults of these so-named divine figures are attested, for the most part, only in other times and places. However, this does not change the fact that Zeus (and other deities) were seen as closely linked to the earth and its fertility (Lebreton 2019, 150-157).

before seeking guidance from an oracle, highlighting the significance of oracular consultation in the decision-making process⁷³. This process can thereby be understood as »a collaborative effort«⁷⁴ that involved both the consultant and the medium as well as the supernatural power or god situated at an oracle. This understanding of the relational, dialogic dimension of oracular consultation as involving the more-than-human »suggests that the consultation of an Oracle was not, or not only, perceived to be a linear process of question and answer conducted by an individual who was attempting to extract a concealed answer about a potential action«. Rather, »it was also field of shared enquiry, negotiation and potential collaboration with – and importantly, among – myriad unseen supernatural forces«⁷⁵. This multi-facetted, highly relational and interactive process created the framework which allowed for a meaningful reflection of the oracular dialogue and for the acceptance and/or interpretations of the respective answers and it is, in many senses, one of the key aspects that allows for a characterization of oracular consultation as a practice of resilience.

As I have argued elsewhere, an oracle site such as Dodona presented an institution where (alternative) responses to particular situations could be sought and communicated⁷⁶. Not only because the place may have presented a site of interaction where people with similar problems came together and exchanged stories, but also because it provided people with the opportunity of communicating their doubts, worries, and uncertainties in the face of nonhuman forces. In this context, it is important to note that the overwhelming majority of the questions found on the tablets deal with practical problems, often-times connected to the immediate future (or present), not with abstract mysteries or open-ended questions. We can see this, for instance, with regard to environment-related questions, because many of the surviving tablets pose agricultural questions of a very general manner⁷⁷. What is striking is that we find many questions of the formula »Should I farm?«⁷⁸.

Looking at them from a resilience perspective, these enquiries fulfilled a crucial discursive as well as performative function in that they helped worshippers to express a specific sense of uncertainty that needed to be resolved. A variant of these questions were those attested in our source material and alluded to above, whether the earth will bring forth enough »fruit(s)«. This was a concern shared by both communities and individuals alike⁷⁹. In this context, a functionalist explanation that underscores how the oracle was used as a site to »reinforce a sense of cohesion«⁸⁰ seems to lend itself, but there is more that could be said about the consultation process. In one example, for instance, someone named Kraton »asks the god about the crops which the earth bears if they might come to fruition«⁸¹. Another person, Eirana (?), asked whether she will be able to reap the harvest of all the fruits⁸². Usually, the general term *karpoi* refers to agricultural produce, that is »fruits« of plants or of the soil. Sometimes this relationship between soil and fruit is formulated explicitly when tablets refer to »fruits which the earth makes grow«⁸³. Sometimes they include a question about which god to pray to in order to have plenty of crops (see below). One reason for why these questions occurred relatively frequently, I would suggest, needs to take into account the processual dynamics as discussed in the recent theories concerning divination and resilience above. This kind of question is not only a way of obtaining reassurance by the god, but can also be read as a statement of the consultant's place within an environment whose myriad parts clearly surmounted the individual's ability of control. Although this is definitely a sentiment differing from the management perspective ingrained in socio-ecological resilience theories, I would still argue that the prevalence they give to unexpected events and to the acceptance of uncertainty as a feature of the lifeworld also holds true for the oracle tablets discussed above. Against this background, the consultation of Dodona may have functioned as a full disclosure of the limits of knowability as well as the

⁷³ On this see Eidinow 2018.

⁷⁴ Eidinow 2013, 32.

⁷⁵ Eidinow 2013, 36.

⁷⁶ See Schliephake forthcoming.

⁷⁷ Issues encompassed the fertility of the fields (DVC 2319A), the keeping of sheep (LOD 80; DVC 2434A), the digging of a well (DVC 1441), the rearing of ducks (DVC 82), the recovery of a plough (DVC 3327B), trees (DVC 2430A+B; 2432; 2952B+2951A; 3338B), the crops (DVC 2264A; 3426A), the status of the threshing floor (DVC 3092B+3091A) or the very frequent enquiry whether to farm at all (DVC 57, 107 and 108, 2291A, 2293B, 2353B; 2673A; 2751B; 2755A; 32228A+3230B; 3929; 4138B),

sometimes in reference to trade or profit (DVC 2673; DVC 2184) or the question where to farm (DVC190B+186A+187A; including questions of acquisition DVC 3677A).

⁷⁸ Parker 2016, 82. For a list of all questions concerning agricultural work see Chaniotis 2017, 63 note 52.

⁷⁹ Cf., for instance, LOD 2 with Eidinow 2007, 350 note 8.

⁸⁰ Eidinow 2007, 64-66.

⁸¹ DVC 2319A: Κράτων ἐπερωτᾷ τὸν θεὸν /περὶ τῶν καρπῶν ὧν ἡ γῆ φύει (vac. 5?) ἢ ἂν ἐντελέεεεε /Γίνωνται.

⁸² DVC 3426A.

⁸³ DVC 2153A and LOD 77.

trust in higher powers when it came to facing an unpredictable world of natural forces.

The process itself has been the subject of lively debate, especially in light of the limited information we have regarding the use of the tablets at Dodona. As Parker has suggested, one method that may explain their presence at Dodona could be the use of cleromancy, or respectively the drawing of lots. In a revealing parallel, he has pointed to similar (Demotic) material from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. In one case, cited by Parker, the consultant asks the god about ploughing the bank near a river, and whether it would be advantageous for him to do so or not – in order to pose his question, the consultant had written two variants of his enquiry on a pair of papyri and the answer (on part of the oracle) consisted in choosing between them⁸⁴. This is a striking reminder of the way the use of natural resources could be religiously marked and how decisions concerning the land could be framed as thought processes that involved the gods. We find similar cases and formulations in the material from Dodona. The reply of the oracle was only one part of this communicative process; another, possibly even more important one, was the opportunity to reflect on and pose a question on part of the consultants. It is therefore not surprising that some of our inquiries »clearly suggest oracular involvement in an ongoing process of deliberation«⁸⁵. Concerning our agriculture-related examples, we can see this in a question by Apollonidas, who asks whether it will be »preferable and profitable« for him, »as he intends, to farm this place?«⁸⁶. This statement does not only include a self-reflective element, which makes clear that the consultant had pondered his situation, but asks for the god's judgement⁸⁷. This concern for divine judgement again entails a reflection on the role of non-human forces involved in the lifeworld. A variant of this reflexivity can be found in the question by someone »which god or goddess he could honor to find salvation in Pharos, respect the planting season and accomplish the (agricultural) work«⁸⁸. This is

much closer to an open question formula than the previous example, but it shows, too, that aspects of the lifeworld like farming were dependent on divine will: »in these mysterious and crucial areas of life, it was essential to keep the right gods on one's side«⁸⁹. As Eidinow has proposed in this context, the ancient Greek model of the self was relational, because it »included a sense of interdependence not only with other mortals, but also with supernatural forces« and this »may be traced in the evidence for the behavior of individuals generally in episodes of deliberation and decision making, and specifically in their approach to, and expectations of, oracular sanctuaries«⁹⁰. The questions concerning working the land referred to above are a good example here. In the way they gave consultants a chance to reflect on their place in the world, they could help in fostering a sense of resilience to the inexplicable and inconsistent developments within the lifeworld. Whatever happened here, the consultants had a sense that they were not alone.

We can find these processual and interdependent dynamics in other examples, namely in those where oracles appear as places of conflict resolution. Angelos Chaniotis in particular has drawn attention to the many tablets from Dodona that can be seen as the expression of legal disputes among the consultants⁹¹. Chaniotis notes that while some inquiries on ancient tablets align with others in seeking information about the immediate future, there are instances where the focus shifts. In these exceptions, the inquiries appear directed towards determining the guilt of an individual. This deviation is notable as it involves individuals who, rather than seeking predictions or guidance for the future, are specifically looking for answers related to acts of injustice committed in the past⁹². Concerning our agrarian context above, we can look at one particularly interesting example which combines a question on one side, and possibly an answer on the other one: »Were Mirion and Euthydamos and [- -]kios privy to the theft of the pigs committed by Charinos?« – »Nei-

⁸⁴ Parker 2015, 111-112.

⁸⁵ Eidinow 2013, 32.

⁸⁶ DVC 3128: [πότερ]ον μέλλει βέντι- /[ον] και ὄναιον ἤμεν /γαοργίοντι τὸν χώρον; also see https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2022/10/ciod_dvc_3128.pdf (10.3.2023). The second part of the question is less clear. It makes reference to a kleros (κλῆρο) or lot, which could explicitly refer to an oracle by lot. There is also the possibility that this entails a reference to a system of land allotment. See Eidinow 2007, 97 note 3.

⁸⁷ Cf. Eidinow 2013, 34.

⁸⁸ DVC 3146A: [θεός · τύχη]α ἀ[γα]θά · [ὁ δεῖνα]/[τίνα κ]α θεῶν ἢ θεᾶν θερ-/απεύων σ[ί]ωζοιτο ἐν Πάρῳ /[καὶ φρά]ζοιτο τὰν ὥραν /[τὰς φυ]τεί-

αὶ καὶ ἔργα /[ἐργά]ζοιτο. Cf. on this https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2022/10/ciod_dvc_3146a.pdf (10.3.2023). The general situation shows great parallels to DVC 2762A and may have to do with the uncertain situation prior to or during the Third Macedonian War, where people may have left Epirus in order to start a new life elsewhere, in this case Pharos. For other inquiries concerning emigration cf. DVC 1363A+1363B; 3220A.

⁸⁹ Eidinow 2007, 137.

⁹⁰ Eidinow 2013, 22, 26.

⁹¹ Cf. Chaniotis 2017, 58-63.

⁹² Chaniotis 2017, 59.

ther Miron nor Euthydamos nor [- -]kios nor Melissa received the pigs that Charinos stole nor did they jointly eat them⁹³. The tablet itself shows traces of eight folds, which implies that it was rolled up on itself. Since the answer was written upside down on the same side by the same scribe, there is a possibility that the consultant received the answer orally and noted it down – or that he or she asked on behalf of someone else and wrote down the oracle’s reply. Apart from the exact mechanism at work, what is probably even more interesting in a social context is how we can imagine the exact situation. Since almost all of the texts analyzed by Chaniotis identify a suspect by name or use a demonstrative pronoun, it could at least be suggested that the suspects were present during the consultation⁹⁴. According to his assertion, individuals seeking justice or resolution at Dodona turned to the oracle because they believed that disputes could not be settled by any secular authority but needed divine intervention. Consequently, in cases of unsolvable legal disputes, both accusers and suspects would come to Dodona, invoke the gods, and collaboratively formulate an inquiry resembling an exculpatory oath. From a resilience perspective, this process is illuminating for various reasons. As Chaniotis points out, unresolved disputes have the potential to erode harmony within a community, poison social interactions, and lead to prolonged conflicts. While the priestesses at Dodona could not pinpoint the guilty party, they did possess the ability to eliminate the source of discord and violent conflict by affirming a suspect’s innocence. Even if justice was not served for the victims, they could, at the very least, maintain their dignity, and those rightfully accused would live with the fear of divine punishment⁹⁵.

Of course, we do not know what would have really happened if someone was declared guilty by the oracle (there are no hints in the texts that this was the case⁹⁶), but that the consultation of an oracle could form part of a larger, over-arching process of social communication and conflict resolution that could, in the long run, aim at restoring peace within a community is beyond question⁹⁷. What distinguishes the sort of exchange taking place between diviner, the divinatory outcomes and the client from, let us say, an exchange in court, is that divinatory practice delimits the possibility of digressions, abstract considerations or the process of arguing over inconsistencies in the evidence, for instance. Rather, there is »an orientation toward the issue at hand«, so that an »abstracted examination never gets started« and »the types of accountability in play« are constrained: »In other words, these interactions hedge the defeasibility of an argument, giving the interaction the ›aura of truth telling‹«⁹⁸. The processual character of drawing conclusions in divinatory ritual is stressed here. In a similar vein, we could say that the process of fostering resilience for a community interested in resolving potentially conflicting situations could include oracle consultation, because the divinatory discourse enabled a meaningful and symbolically charged negotiation of how the past impacted the present and possibly the future. By helping to understand how specific actions affected later outcomes, it could assist in re-orientating the course of action ahead or in settling old problems. The point is that the divinatory ritual was part of these social processes itself.

93 DVC 2005a: [ῆ] σύνοιδε Μίρων καὶ Εὐθύδαμος καὶ Νικίας] /καὶ Μέλι(σ)σα τᾶν ὑῶν τᾶν(ν) Χ[αρί]νος ε. γ. [- - -]/ἀνέκλεψε; 2006a: [θεός (?). οὐκ ἐ]δέξατο Μίρων οὐδ’ Εὐθύδαμος /[οὐδὲ Νικί[α]ς οὐδὲ Μέλισσα τὰς /ῥας τὰς [Χαρίνος ἀνέκλεψε] οὐδὲ συγκατέφαγον. There is a fair chance that DVC 2006a records one of the few answers that we possess from the oracle at Dodona, although the consultation method itself is obscure. For this see Lhôte’s commentary on the Dodona Online webpage: https://dodonaonline.files.wordpress.com/2022/03/ciod_dvc_2005a2006a.pdf (9.3.2023). A similar consultation can be found in DVC 2482B+248A.

94 Chaniotis (2017, 61) suggests that the phrasing may also suggest two variants of an answer to an enquiry and that a form of cleromancy may have been used to decide between the two. This latter argument had been brought forth by Parker 2015. There were more open-ended questions like the question whether someone had stolen the wheat that was missing (DVC 3041A).

95 Cf. Chaniotis 2017, 62.

96 On avoidance of explicitly naming a guilty party in the answers of oracles see Parker 1985, 314.

97 In fact, this observation finds affirmation in some of the anthropological studies quoted above. As Zeitlyn has pointed out, divinatory practice needs not be solely concerned with the prediction of an uncertain future, but many cases he discusses are, in fact, »diagnostic«, that is they try to account for why certain things have come to pass (and others have not). Cf. Zeitlyn 2012, 528–534.

98 Zeitlyn 2012, 531. In an earlier article, Werbner, too, had outlined that divinatory processes can involve the revision of understandings of the past and the modulation of retrospective knowledge in order to define a course of further action (Werbner 1973, 1439).

Concluding Remarks

While chronological aspects have been left out of my discussion of the tablets, there can be no question that the oracle at Dodona offered a platform for enquiries for many centuries. There may have been periods where certain questions or problems took predominance, but overall, although this will be a task for further analysis, it is safe to say that agrarian and environment-related questions remained a key area of enquiry from the beginnings of the oracle into Hellenistic times. The material use of resources of the land, including animals, was of utmost importance to the worshippers who came to Dodona, because their livelihood depended on it. In this context, the social practice of consulting an oracle provided a way of communicating uncertainty in the face of nonhuman forces, and also a sense of interdependence with the gods. The anticipation of possible future scenarios, depending, for instance, on good soil or weather conditions, but also the social diagnosis of things that happened in the past and implicated the present, were important steps in determining and negotiating future courses of action. As it has been argued in the course of this essay, the oracular communication was symbolically framed as a powerful medium for expressing uncertainty, for resolving questions and conflicts, and for exchanging knowledge with the help of stories, myth, and ritual. While these constructivist elements are important

for discussing the social function and role of the oracle as an institution, the processual and highly relational dimension of the consultation need to be taken into account if we want to analyze how ancient Greek worshippers may have established a relation to the responsible deities, in the case of Dodona Zeus, via the ritualized sets of communication. These processual and relational aspects, together with their social function, also offer opportunities for integrating resilience theory into our understanding of ancient Greek oracles, and of divination in general.

In particular, the resilience perspective can bring the interplay of the different actors and elements within the socio-ecological framework as sketched out in the course of this essay into swift focus. It helps in reflecting on the role that religious practice – and here, specifically, the communication with an oracle – could play for dealing with the uncertainties of a lifeworld dependent on regular harvests. The way the enquiries were framed shows how the consultants not only reflected on their limits of knowledge (of the future) but also on their readiness to face the unexpected. This provided them with a set of ritual autonomy and agency in an environment whose ways were not always stable or foreseeable – and to get into contact with powers that they depended on to make a living.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Schwerpunkt des Aufsatzes liegt auf der antiken Praxis der Divination, insbesondere auf der Befragung von Orakeln. Anhand einer Reihe von Zeugnissen aus dem Orakelheiligtum von Dodona zeigt der Aufsatz, wie die Fragen, die dem Orakel zwischen dem 6. und 2. Jahrhundert v. Chr. gestellt wurden, unter dem Gesichtspunkt der Resilienz interpretiert werden können. Insbesondere mit Blick auf landwirtschaftliche Probleme wie mögliche Ernteauffälle, die zu erwartende Regenmenge oder die richtige Bodenbearbeitung wird auf der Grundlage sozio-ökologischer Resilienztheorien untersucht, inwieweit Orakel eine Institution darstellten, die einen ritualisierten Rahmen für die Entwicklung von Problemlösungsstrategien bot. Neben Aspekten der Weitergabe und Aushandlung von Wissen, die im Kontext der Orakelkonsultation zweifellos eine wichtige Rolle spielten, werden auch die performativen Aspekte der Kommunikation mit den jeweiligen Göttern und deren sozialer Rahmung betrachtet.