

# Cults, Navigation and Maritime Practices in the Middle and Southern Adriatic (6<sup>th</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century BC)

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In Greek and Roman times, sailing in the Adriatic Sea was considered an extremely dangerous activity. This negative perception may have contributed to the image of the Adriatic as *alimenos*, i. e. harborless, recorded in the Augustan period by some authors such as Strabo and Livy. Several elements contributed to this dreadful reputation. One was probably only superficial acquaintance with the terrain: until the Augustan age, the length of Illyria was known, but not its depth.<sup>1</sup> The second element was the real difficulty in coping with winds and sea currents: Ps.-Scymnos (vv. 384–387) remarks that the Adriatic could be suddenly shaken by wild storms and thunderbolts. The last and possibly the most important reason arose from various anthropic factors. One was piracy, which flourished for centuries in the Adriatic. Another and more weighty problem was the political, economic and cultural organization of the Adriatic peoples, which prevented the spread of Greek establishments.

For all these reasons, probably, sailing in this sea was strongly connected with ritual, beliefs and sacred places, which had a very important function in the dynamics of navigation and exchanges. Therefore, a particular feature of ancient Adriatic trade was the fact that the places of exchange were often associated with significant landmarks and with places of worship. In the northern Adriatic, at Timavum, the salt marsh was controlled by the sanctuary of Diomedes, which also owned a harbour (*limen*), a thriving wood and seven springs of water (Strabo 5, 1, 8). In the middle Adriatic, the *emporion* of Nestaioi, at the mouth of the river Naron, modern Neretva, is precisely described by Pseudo-Skylax (Periplus 24).<sup>2</sup> The trading place, located inside a wide lagoon giving access to the hinterland was linked to the legend of Kadmos and Harmonia. The legend of the Greek hero Diomedes provides another case in point to show the link between sacred places and Adriatic navigation. The strategic position of the cult places sacred to the hero Diomedes suggests indeed the image of a cultural maritime map. Already from the 6<sup>th</sup> c. BC, in the poems of Ibicos of Rhegion, Diomedes appears as the tutelary god of the Adriatic and still in the Augustan period, the Greek hero is described as a kind of Adriatic ruler. Worship places of the hero are often located on promontories, like the *promontorium Diomedis* (Plin. nat. 3, 141) recognized by the Croatian archaeologists on the Dalmatian coast near Sibenik, at Cap Ploča. This place, where a very simple shrine was dedicated to Diomedes, as proved by some Greek graffiti dated between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, was crucial for the seacoast visibility and for the direction of streams. Offerings, whether ceramic (more than 65 000 fragments) or coins, confirm the economic importance of this sacred place.<sup>3</sup> Diomedes’ cult may also have been connected with the Conero promontory, according to a passage in the Periplus of Pseudo-Skylax (16) placing in the country of the Ombrians a sanctuary devoted to the hero.

Finally, the cult of Diomedes seems to be deeply linked with the insular morphology, as the ancient tradition concerning the mythical islands of Diomedes demonstrates, from

Pliny (Plin. nat. 3, 151. 10, 126) through to Saint Augustine (Aug. civ. 18, 16). According to Strabo (5, 1, 9) the „Islands of Diomedes“, as well as the relationships with the king Daunus and the foundation of Argyrippa-Arpi, show the evidence of the hero's domination on the sea. Traditionally located on the Tremiti archipelago, the shrine has now been conclusively placed on the island of Palagruza, following the excavations of Croatian scholars.<sup>4</sup> However, I argue that this island, very near to the western Adriatic coast, was considered by the ancient sailors as a part of the Tremiti archipelago. In fact, Tremiti and Palagruza could have been perceived as a continuum by the ancient sailors, such a kind of 'bridge of islands' linking the western to the eastern Adriatic coast.<sup>5</sup> These islands are still considered as a whole in the military handbooks of navigation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This perception could explain the traditional location of Diomedes' sanctuary among the Apulian islands. Now, the chronology of sherds and script from Palagruza suggests that Greek sailors used to visit this shrine from the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC through to the Roman period (coins of Dyrrachium, 3<sup>rd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> century). Moreover, some offerings (such as: *Soleios anetheke*) dating from the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century (in an Aeginetan script) show complete similarity with finds from Adria and prove that the island „was a crucial landmark for Greek sailors when sailing the open sea.“<sup>6</sup>

### **The oracle of Dodona and the Ionian-Adriatic exchanges**

If those links between sacred topography and the Ionian-Adriatic navigation start to become better known, the role of the oracular sanctuary of Dodona in these dynamics of circulation and exchange is still less explored. At a first glance, one would not be tempted to link this sacred place to navigation and maritime exchange. Located at 22 kilometres far from the modern city of Ioannina, the sanctuary was in the hinterland of Epirus, at the foot of the Mount Tomaros. Nevertheless, this site was quite close enough to the Ambracian Gulf and to other ports, such as Ambracia and Amphilochia.<sup>7</sup> Some routes inland started from those ports and the route from the Acheron mouth to Dodona could have served for pilgrims who visited the Nekromanteion and came afterwards to Dodona. The myth of foundation of the sanctuary itself, in Herodotus' version (Hdt. 2, 54) stresses the foreign origin of the first priestess, who would have been transported to Epirus from Egypt by Phoenician pirates.

Now, some archeological and epigraphical data may highlight this 'maritime' side of the oracle of Dodona. I make reference to a significant group within the corpus of the lead tablets discovered in the sanctuary, published by Éric Lhôte in 2006: the author presents a commentary to each text and an interesting proposal for a thematic classification of the texts, which refer to a wide variety of public and private issues. One of these sections is specifically devoted to the long distance trade „grand commerce“.<sup>8</sup> One year later, Martine Dieterle published a study on the sanctuary and its historical development, in which she suggests a chronology of the tablets in several cases higher than the one of Lhôte.<sup>9</sup> In the same year, Esther Eidinow published a book on Greek oracles and curses, where a chapter

presented the catalogue and commentary of some oracular tablets from Dodona. The author highlighted the importance of travel and move within this corpus.<sup>10</sup> In 2013, two volumes signed by S. Dakaris, J. Vokotopoulou and A.-P. Kristidis have been published.<sup>11</sup> Because of the particular circumstances of the publication,<sup>12</sup> this work does not present any introduction or thematic and chronological order. Despite that, this important study has enabled us to know all the tablets discovered in the excavations of 1928–1932 and 1952–1956. Some thousands of texts, mostly referring to private life, have been brought to the knowledge of the scientific community. Many of these tablets, less or more complete and preserved, bring inscribed questions related to long-distance and maritime trade. These inscriptions date from the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. Most of them belong, as we shall see, to the period between the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Concerns about maritime trade could be recognised by some distinctive words. Firstly, the verb *emporeuomai* (or *enporeuomai*), which occurs at least 41 times among the tablets from Dodona. The verb is quite always employed at the masculine participle *emporeuomenos*,<sup>13</sup> indicating the personal involvement of the people seeking advice from the oracle. Within this group, at least 15 examples must be connected to the maritime trade by some conclusive clues. They can be the reference to a maritime destination or the association with other significant words such as *naus* or *pleō*, finally the indication *kata thalassan*,<sup>14</sup> sometimes in the form *kata gān kai kata thalassan*,<sup>15</sup> “on land and sea”. Obviously, we can assume that many other inscriptions could refer to shipping trade, even when it is not specified.

Another family of words, which clearly indicates the maritime journey, is linked with boat (*naus*) and sail (*pleo*, *nauklareō*, *nautilloimai*). We find 13 mentions of a boat, at least three times together with the verb *nauklareō* (*ναυκλαρω* or *ναυκληρέω*), probably with the meaning of „navigate“. One inscription quotes a technical name of a commercial ship, the *gaūlos*; the same name is given by Herodotus to some Phœnician ships.<sup>16</sup> As for the verb *nauklareō*, it occurs at least 6 times, at least in three cases in this Dorian form. Another technical word used for the activity of sailing is the verb *nautilloimai*, which occurs at least 5 times, always with the participle, *nautilloimenos*.

Some lead tablets specify the destination of the trade activity; these indications are very useful to give an overview on the maritime space related to the oracular sanctuary. The mention of Korkyra comes in a tablet of the 4<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>17</sup> which seems to bear a personal question on a commercial travel to the Ionian islands: *lloni* (---ei)-s *Kork(uran---*) *sùn E(---*) (fig. 1). Two others tablets, of the same century, quote Corinth as possible destination. If one is very poorly preserved,<sup>18</sup> the second seems more clearly to put a question from someone named Agēs or Ageus, asking if he should make trade, and receiving an answer that

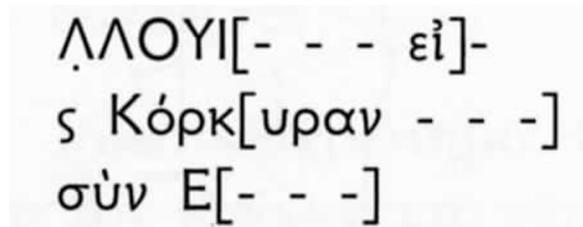


Fig. 1: Inscribed tablet from Dodona, with the mention of Kerkyra.

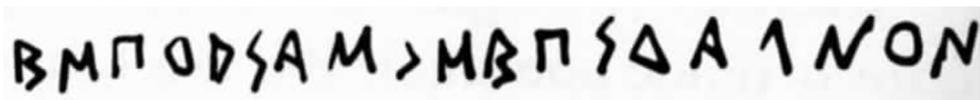


Fig. 2: Inscribed tablet from Dodona, with mention of Epidamnos.

the editors suggest to complete *en Ko(rinthōi)*, in Corinth.<sup>19</sup> Epidamnos appears at least four times, in some texts dating already from the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> and throughout the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20</sup> More precisely, the most ancient tablet of this series, dating around 550–525 BC, with badly legible words, is inscribed in Archaic Corinthian alphabet: *emporias es Epidamnon* (fig. 2).<sup>21</sup> If we accept the date of the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>22</sup> we could recognise this example as one of the most ancient inscriptions of the whole corpus of Dodona. Quite the same phrase comes back in two more recent tablets, the first dating from the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, also written in a Corinthian dialect,<sup>23</sup> the second one, poorly preserved, dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>24</sup> One more tablet, published by E. Lhôte, shows a quite similar sentence, at the plural: *emporouomenoi es Epidamnon*. Another destination of these maritime trades, quoted at least twice within the corpus of Dodona, is the Island of Pharos. At the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, a certain Aristodamos asks whether it might be advantageous for him (*ē lōion kai ameion*) to sail to Pharos during the summer (*plēonti (kata thalass)an kai es Pháron tou̯ théreos*).<sup>25</sup> Another consultant, Theokleidas, asks if he will be wealthy if sailing toward Pharos (*ē eis Pharon pleusas*).<sup>26</sup> In both cases, the grammatical forms of some expressions (*satei* for the Attic *tētes*, „this year“; *onasis* for the Attic *onesis*, „gain, profit“)<sup>27</sup> (fig. 3) reveal the Dorian origin of the person who wrote the questions, probably the same consulting the oracle.

The coastal *polis* of Apollonia is another destination, attested at least in a fragmentary tablet, which is also one of the most published within this corpus.<sup>28</sup> According to the suggestion

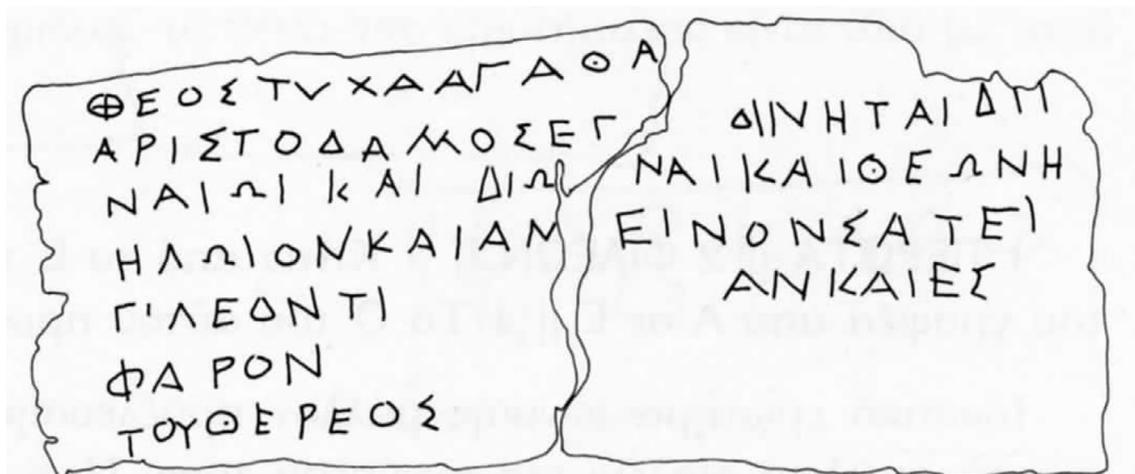


Fig. 3: Inscribed tablet from Dodona, quoting a trade expedition to Pharos.

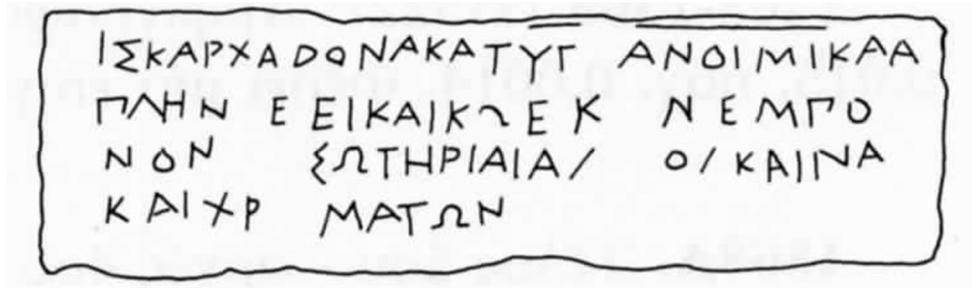


Fig. 4: Inscribed tablet from Dodona, mentioning Karkedon.

of Éric Lhôte, the word *alaston* could be read *ala(i)ston*, and could signify „without meeting pirates“.<sup>29</sup> As this locution would be a hapax legomenon, the author remains very cautious about this hypothesis; nevertheless, piracy was one of the most common and dangerous activities in the Ionian-Adriatic space and navigation.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to these examples, some other writings request the advice of gods for a more distant space. This is the case of some questions referring to expeditions towards to the Liburnian lands,<sup>31</sup> Sicily,<sup>32</sup> Elea<sup>33</sup> and Carthago.<sup>34</sup> Particularly, for this last destination, someone asks to the gods if he will succeed to sail to the Punic city, with his boat and his cargo and his goods (*kai na(os) kai chrēmatōn*), (*e)is Karchedon*) (fig. 4). In another example, written in an Ionian dialect, the dedicators ask the opinion of the god for an eventual expedition to the Adriatic Sea among a population, not better identified, of the Tisates.<sup>35</sup> Rather than a trip to the *emporium* of Adria in the Po Valley, as proposed by Éric Lhôte,<sup>36</sup> I prefer to read here, as also Esther Eidinow suggests,<sup>37</sup> the general allusion to the Adriatic trade, and to a population, the Tisates, that still remains to be identified.

To conclude, this overview on the corpus of the inscriptions of Dodona allows us to reach some meaningful conclusions. The first is the coherence of this central-southern Adriatic space, especially in the period between the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, when a local production of commercial amphoras (Corinthian B2) is located in Corcyra. We can also mention a significant testimony for the commercial importance of Epidamne, where a magistrate called *poletēs* (from the verb *polein*, to sell) was elected every year to manage the commercial relations with the Illyrians and to preside over a market created outside the city, in order to avoid that a too large number of people of bad kind (*poneroi*) settle in the city to make trade there.<sup>38</sup> The Corinthian presence, revealed by scripts and dialects, is significant. To sum up, we could come to the conclusion that this important oracle seems to have had a great reputation for commercial mobility, directed in particular towards the Ionian-Adriatic region (Epidamnos), the Corinthian Gulf, some sites of Sicily and the western Mediterranean, between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. It seems that this ancient and prestigious oracle could have functioned as a place to gather not only advises and help from the deities, but also to obtain some precious information about the most thriving Adriatic emporia.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Šašel Kos 2005, 114.

<sup>2</sup> Peretti 1979, 252–261.

<sup>3</sup> Bilić-Dujmusic 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Čače – Kirigin 1998.

<sup>5</sup> D'Ercole 2018, with the previous bibliography.

<sup>6</sup> Kirigin et al. 2010, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Hammond 1967, 285.

<sup>8</sup> Lhôte 2006, nos. 99–106 (grand commerce). 185–226.

<sup>9</sup> Dieterle 2007, 347–355.

<sup>10</sup> Eidinow 2007, 72–124.

<sup>11</sup> Lhôte 2006; Dakaris et al. 2013.

<sup>12</sup> The study was indeed published after the passing of the three authors: see the review of Doukellis 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, I 137 no. 430, first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

<sup>14</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, I 172 no. 580 A, end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century: *kata thalassan enporeuomenos*.

<sup>15</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, I 137 no. 430 (=SEG 43 (1993) 104 no. 341), 4<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>16</sup> Hdt. 3, 136. 8, 97.

<sup>17</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, I 422 no. 1768 A, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

<sup>18</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, I 437 no. 1855 B, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC: (*en Korin*)*thōi e(mporeuomenos)*.

<sup>19</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, II 266 no. 3442 A, beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

<sup>20</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, I 2 no. 3 (=SEG 43 (1993) 103 no. 335), ca. 550–525 BC; Dakaris et al. 2013, II 212 no. 3185, middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century; Dakaris et al. 2013, I 422 no. 1770 B, 5<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century: (*peri em*)*poría(s) (eis E)pid(amnon) / (---)(.)TŌN(...)*.

<sup>21</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, I 2 no. 3 (=SEG 43 (1993) 103 no. 335); Lhôte 2006, 211 f. no. 98.

<sup>22</sup> Lhôte 2006, 211 f., dates the tablet around 475 BC; Eidinow 2007, 346, prefers to maintain the high chronology, 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.

<sup>23</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, II 212 no. 3185: (*peri empori*)*as es Epida(mnon)*.

<sup>24</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, I 422 no. 1770 B: (*peri em*)*poría(s) / (eis E)pid(amnon) / (---)(.)TŌN(...)*.

<sup>25</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, I 85 no. 228 B, beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

<sup>26</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, II 177 no. 3030 A, second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

<sup>27</sup> *Satei*: Dakaris et al. 2013, I 85 no. 228 B; *krematōn onasis*: Dakaris et al. 2013, II 177 no. 3030 A.

<sup>28</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, I 122 no. 366 A, middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC; SEG 43 (1993) 102 no. 333 (right part of a lead tablet, ca. 300–275): (*es?*) *Apollonian pleúsas ei alastōn tē (...e ontōn punthanoito*. Lhôte 2006, 208–210 no. 97, suggests a different reading, as we shall see below.

<sup>29</sup> Lhôte 2006, 209 f.

<sup>30</sup> On the Adriatic piracy: Braccesi 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, II 324 no. 3742 B, 4<sup>th</sup> century: *ei esi Libu(---p)len*.

<sup>32</sup> Eidinow 2007, 77 no. 9 (dated around 375); Dakaris et al. 2013, II no. 4154 B (end of the 5<sup>th</sup> or beginning

of the 4<sup>th</sup> century), where Archō(n)idas asks if he could make a right choice sailing toward Sicily (*póteron pléō es Sik(élian)*). We might wonder if this person could be the Archonidas known by another tablet.

<sup>33</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, II 33 no. 2363 B, beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century: *Elaie (---) pleō*.

<sup>34</sup> Dakaris et al. 2013, II 337 no.1363 A, middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>35</sup> Lhôte 2006, 214–216 no. 100.

<sup>36</sup> Lhôte 2006, 216.

<sup>37</sup> Eidinow 2007, 79 no. 19.

<sup>38</sup> Plut. qu. Gr. 29. On this charge, see Cabanes 2001, 53 f.

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Fig. 1: after Dakaris et al. 2013. – Fig. 2: after Dakaris et al. 2013, I. – Fig. 3: after Dakaris et al. 2013, I. – Fig. 4: after Dakaris et al. 2013, II.

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