

DODONA AND NOSTOS

Introduction

The Homeric references to the oracle of Dodona, (*Iliad* 2.749, 16.233; *Odyssey* 14.327-330=19.296-299), have confused commentators since the *Scholia*.¹ Much of their debate has concerned the proper identification, spelling, and meaning of the Selloi/Helloi, about the implications of Homer's poems for the oracle's early apparatus and technique (for which, see Janko *ad Il.* 16.233, 234-5 and bibl.), and about various geographic questions related to the oracle's location. It is not my intention to address these questions, but, rather, to speculate on the meaning Dodona had for the Homeric narrator and his character speakers.² In the middle of his discussion of Dodona, Strabo (7.7.10) makes a general comment that, τὰ δὲ μυθεύόμενα περὶ τῆς δρυὸς καὶ τῶν πελειῶν καὶ εἴ τινα ἄλλα τοιαῦτα, καθάπερ καὶ [τὰ] περὶ Δελφῶν, τὰ μὲν ποιητικωτέρας ἐστὶ διατριβῆς τὰ δ' οἰκεῖα τῆς νῦν περιοδείας. This paper proceeds from a similar philosophy: when it comes to Dodona, there is an important connection between geography and poetry, and in any given comment within the poets, the two fields must be considered, if not absolutely together, then at least overlapping.

More precisely, this paper will seek to show how all of the Homeric references to Dodona—including Akhilleus invokes Ζεῦ...Δωδωναῖε during his prayer for Patroklos' success and health in battle, and including Odysseus' claim in his (twice-told) Cretan tale that Odysseus went to Dodona en route to Ithaca—relate to a desire for a successful journey and a safe return. Finally, it will show that this connection between Dodona and return journeys is confirmed by and reflected in the archaeological record of question-tablets excavated at Dodona.³

That Dodona should so often, and in such a wide spectrum of Greek literature, be tied to the idea of “return,” should not, for students of archaeology, be particularly surprising, for recent advances in the archaeological research and classification of the Dodona' tablets have confirmed that Dodona was, in practice, particularly well known (or at least well used) for travel-related questions. Compilation of Dodona's question-tablets shows that questions relating to travel, especially sea-travel, occur more frequently than most others. Though Esther Eidinow has rightly cautioned that the limited number of extant inscriptions precludes

¹ There exists one other possible reference to Dodona in the suitor Amphinomos' recommendation (*Od.* 16.400-405) that, prior to killing Telemachus, the suitors ought to consult the “will of the gods” (θεῶν εἰρώμεθα βουλὰς), and in particular to receive the “decrees of great Zeus” (Διὸς μέγαλοιο θέμιστες). Though the suitors seem to approve of this plan (τοῖσιν δ' ἐπὶ νῆδαν ἐμύθησε—*Od.* 16.406), they then immediately enter into Odysseus' palace, make no effort to actually send an envoy to any oracle, and the matter is never picked up again. The Διὸς μέγαλοιο θέμιστες certainly seems to suggest the oracle of Zeus at Dodona, but the oracle itself is not mentioned. It therefore seems to make sense to treat this case as slightly aberrant and, for our purposes, unrelated to the other, more explicit, mentions of that oracle.

² Dodona seems to be the “oracle of choice” for the Homeric poems, receiving more mentions than Delphi. Agamemnon is said to have consulted the Pythian at *Odyssey* 8.79-81, and Achilles in the *Iliad* mentions the proverbial wealth of Delphi. Because *Od.* 8.79-81 is the only reference to consultation of the Pythian oracle in Homer, the lines have been frequently rejected as late interpolations, but Heubeck, West, and Hainsworth see such concerns as unnecessary (see Heubeck/West/Hainsworth 1988 *ad.* 8.79 for discussion and bibl.). For discussion of the Delphic oracle in Homer (and more generally), see Parke/Wormell 1956.

³ This question has not, to my knowledge, been answered before with regard to the admittedly small totality of Homeric references to Dodona, nor has the Homeric evidence been put together with the archaeological record. Gwatkin (1961), writing on Dodona in Homer, did not propose real connections between the references in the two poems, nor did he have access to the collected Dodona response tablets.