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5 Mapping out the sacred landscape of Epirus

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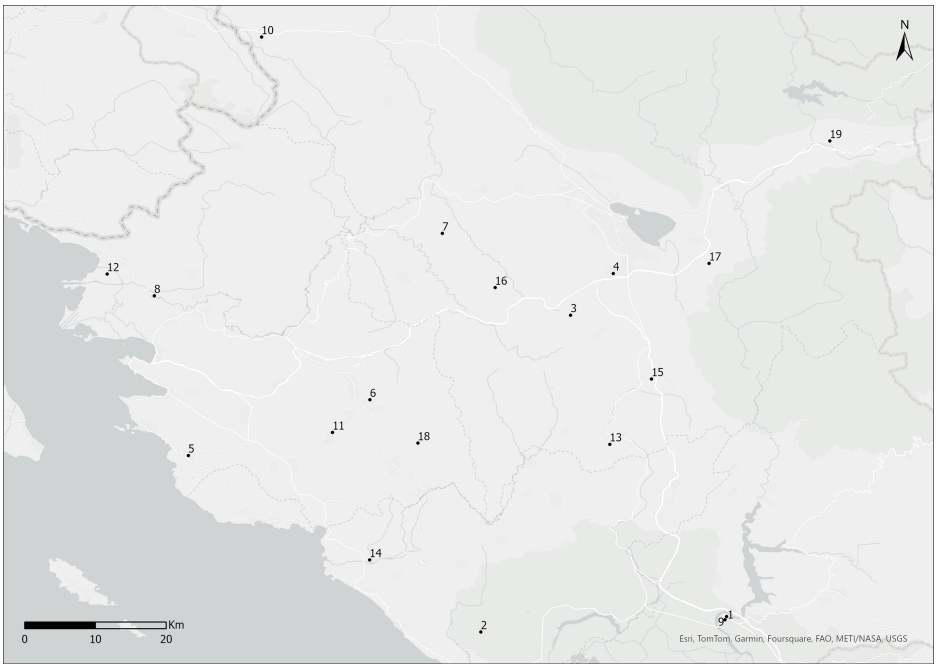
To my mother, Penelope.

This paper offers an overview of the published material of the Epirotic sanctuaries. The presentation will be limited to the geographical area of modern Epirus (prefectures of Arta, Ioannina, Preveza, and Thesprotia) and it will cover the period from the Early Iron Age (eighth century BC) to the beginning of the Roman conquest (second to early first century BC). Areas of ritual character in Epirus range from shrines to organized sanctuaries. It is not always easy to identify the deity/deities worshipped at the ritual places presented.

Introduction

The land of Epirus, located in northwestern Greece, is today divided into four regional units: Arta, Ioannina, Preveza, and Thesprotia. The examination of the sacred landscape of Epirus during antiquity will follow this division. Strabo (7.7) writes that, according to Theopompus, there were 14 Epirotic tribes, among which one of the most powerful were the Molossians. They settled in central Epirus, but the boundaries of their 'state' are not yet clearly defined (Funke, Moustakis and Horchschulz 2004: 338–39; Pliakou 2007: 283–91). Chaones, Thesprotians, and then Cassopaei occupied the coast, a fertile area stretching from the Ceraunian Mountains to the Ambracian Gulf (Map 5.1).

In the case of Epirus, very few systematic studies of sanctuary and cultic material have been published, and most focus on Molossia (the area of the Ioannina prefecture). This is probably a result of the lack of primary sources and significant historical information about Epirus in general. Nevertheless, more systematic research and a larger number of publications about cult in Epirus have been noted in the last 25 years. More specifically, François Quantin (1999) outlined the basic characteristics of Epirotic religion, focusing on its character and on its regional nuances and aspects. Diego Chapinal-Heras (2019) dealt with the role of the Molossian sanctuaries in the territorial organization of Epirus, while in his dissertation (2021) he focused on the sanctuary of Dodona and its relationship to the environment and the wider landscape. Lorenzo Mancini (2021) discussed the sanctuaries in Molossia, Thesprotia, and Chaonia. Based on archaeological, literary, and inscriptional evidence, he re-examined all the known religious places of the aforementioned areas in a critical review, proposing new chronologies and interpretations. Moreover, through a series of articles (Mancini 2013a; 2013b; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019), he used the architectural study of buildings and architectural elements to extract conclusions about the form of temples. The publication of the two-volume study of the lead oracular tablets from Dodona (2013) by Dakaris, Vokotopoulou and Christidis shed further light on some aspects of the organization of Epirotic religion.



Map 5.1. 1. Ambracia; 2. Cassope; 3. Dodona; 4. Dourouti; 5. Dymokastro; 6. Elea; 7. Giourganista; 8. Gitana; 9. Koudounotrypa; 10. Ktismata; 11. Kyra Panagia; 12. Mastilitsa; 13. Mousiotitsa; 14. Nekromanteion; 15. Pesta; 16. Psina; 17. Rachi Platanias; 18. Vaxia; 19. Votonosi.

Overview of the sanctuaries

Arta

The worship of Apollo was predominant in the city of **Ambracia** (ID8923), which served as the capital city of the Epirote state from 294 BC. Apollo, as the patron deity of the city, was worshipped as Agyieus, protector of journeys and settlers, having the *baetylus* (obelisk) as his symbol (mostly represented on coins) (Tzouvara-Souli 1984: 429–35; 1992: 133–46). Additionally, the god appears as Pythius Soter (saviour), Helios (sun), Actius (god of navigation, he took his name from the site of Action at Preveza), and Toxophoros (Kaponis 2020: 332). The remains of a peripteral Doric temple (20.75 × 44m) dated to *ca.* 500 BC have been revealed at the centre of the city (Fig. 5.1). It consisted of a pronaos and a longitudinal cella (Vokotopoulou 1969: 39–43; Mancini 2021: 235). The temple was made of local limestone and at the cella's extremity there was a tripartite pedestal, supporting the cult statue or symbol of Apollo Pythius Soter (Niarou 2015: 30), to whom the temple was dedicated based on a group of clay figurines and an inscribed stele (treaty between Ambracia and Charadros: Cabanes and Andréou 1985). Recently, a marble relief dating to the middle of the fourth century BC has been recovered from the floor of the Byzantine church of Agia Theodora, depicting a seated Muse with a musical instrument and a standing male figure holding an unidentified object (Papadopoulou 2017: 75, fig. 132). The relief has been attributed by the excavators to the temple of Apollo and possibly relates to its restoration in the fourth century BC.

According to the epigraphic evidence, other popular cults in Ambracia include those of Artemis (Tzouvara-Souli 1992: 155–56, 165–66; Kaponis 2020: 333–41), Athena (Tzouvara-Souli 1992: 146–51; Kaponis 2020: 346–49), Aphrodite (Tzouvara-Souli 1992: 169–75; Kaponis 2020: 353–59), Dione (Tzouvara-Souli 1992: 185; Kaponis 2020: 353),

Fig. 5.1. Aerial view of the temple of Apollo, Ambracia. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Arta.

Zeus (Tzouvara-Souli 1992: 180–84; Kaponis 2020: 350–53), Asclepius (Tzouvara-Souli 1992: 179–80; Kaponis 2020: 365–66), Hercules (Tzouvara-Souli 1992: 197–99; Kaponis 2020: 341–46), Hera (Kaponis 2020: 366–67), Hestia (Tzouvara-Souli 1992: 182–83; Kaponis 2020: 349–50) and Dionysus (Kaponis 2020: 363–65). Of special interest is also the reference to several Egyptian deities, such as Isis, Anubis, Serapis, and Harpocrates (Tzouvara-Souli 1992: 175–79), as well as the worship of heroes, such as Gorgos (Kaponis 2020: 368–69), and kings, such as Pyrrhus (Tzouvara-Souli 1992: 200), or Roman emperors, such as Octavian (Tzouvara-Souli 1992: 201).

Besides the imposing temple of Apollo, two small shrines have been discovered outside the city walls (ID8923) (Riginos 2008: 61). The first seems to be devoted to Poseidon (Kaponis 2020: 367) or the local Ambracian deity, Arachthus (Kaponis 2020: 367–68), based on a group of bronze figurines of bulls. The second, based on the iconography of the large clay busts and the tablets with relief decoration that have been uncovered, is related to a Chthonian deity.

On the Perranthe Hill, which overlooks the city of Ambracia, the discovery of a group of clay figurines led to the hypothesis that the Koudonotrypa cave served as a site of worship devoted to the Nymphs (Tzouvara-Souli 1992: 188–97; Bachlas 2020; Kaponis 2020: 359–62) and the deities associated with them: Pan and Hermes (Kaponis 2020: 362–63) (Fig. 5.2).

Ioannina

The 'Harsh-wintered' **Dodona** (ID156) was the main cult place of Zeus in Epirus probably since the Bronze Age (Dieterle 2007: 134–38, 235–72; Vasileiou 2008; 2016; 2020; Luce 2010: 20–28) (Fig. 5.3). The oldest reference to the shrine derives from Homer (Hom. *Il.* 2.748–50, 16.233–35; *Od.* 14.327–30, 19.296–99); however, there is still no evidence from the excavations attesting to the existence of a special place dedicated to the cult before that period. Initially, it was believed that Mother Earth was worshipped in the area close to the sacred oak tree. The travel-writer Pausanias provides us with part of a hymn chanted by the priestesses of Dodona, which refers to her cult: 'Zeus was, Zeus is, Zeus will be. Earth gives fruits, so you shall praise Mother Earth!' (Paus. 10.12.10). It is difficult to define when oracular activity started at the site, but following the historian Herodotus, it seems that

Fig. 5.2. Group of findings from the Koudounotrypa cave, Archaeological Museum of Arta. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Arta.

Fig. 5.3. Aerial view of the Sanctuary of Dodona. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina.

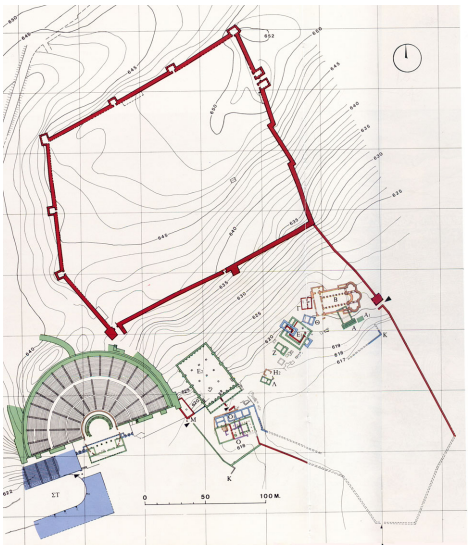


Fig. 5.4. Layout of the Sanctuary of Dodona. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina.

Dodona was the most ancient place of divination in Greece (Hdt. 2.52.2). Aristotle notes that the oracle was operating during the time of the great cataclysm (Arist. *Met.* 1.14.). Based on the passage of the *Iliad* where Achilles prays to Zeus Dodonaios Pelasgian (Hom. *Il.* 16.233–35), the hypothesis that the cult of Earth (Gaia) was replaced by the cult of Zeus in the second millennium has been put forward (Dakaris 1998: 86–92; Georgoudi 1998: 317–20, 335–40; Eidinow 2007: 60).

For centuries, the shrine remained rather rudimentary. The sanctuary was an open-air space and various ceremonies were performed around the sacred oak tree. It is believed that, from the eighth to the beginning of the fourth century BC, the oak tree was surrounded by cauldrons that rested on bronze tripods (*FGrHist* IIIB, 201–2; Steph. Byz. S.v. Δωδώνη (*FGrHist* 327, F20); Dakaris 1998: 37–39; Dieterle 2007: 265, 363–82; Emmerling 2012: 71–74, 263; Vasileiou 2016: 42).

The first architectural remains, which can be related to the so-called prebuilding phase of the sanctuary in Dodona, were unearthed by the archaeologists Dimitris Evangelidis and Sotiris Dakaris (1959). At the end of the fifth century BC, Dodona transformed gradually to a place where politics and cult coexisted harmoniously (Moustakis 2006: 201; Gravani 2016). It is suggested that the Molossians took control of Dodona from the Thesprotians during Tharypas' kingship (423/2–390/385 BC) (Plut., *Pyrrhus* 1.3) (Meyer 2013; Liampi 2017: 285–91; Raynor 2017).

In the first half of the fourth century BC, the landscape of Dodona started changing (Moustakis 2006: 193–200; Vlachopoulou-Oikonomou 2016) (Fig. 5.4). A small naiskos (E1; 4.20 × 6.5m), erected near the sacred oak tree in the eastern area, seems to have mainly served as a storage room for the offerings brought by people from all over Greece to the divine couple, namely Zeus and Dione (Dakaris 1998: 37–49; Skalisti and Georgoulas 2014: 97–98; Georgoulas 2016: 46–47). The enclosure of Dodona (the so-called 'Acropolis', Gerogiannis 2021: 307–13; Suha 2021: 148–50), the ancient town (whose inhabitants, the Dodonaeans, are mentioned in Dakaris Vokotopoulou and Christidis (2013), henceforth DVC, 295B, 1089B, 2425A, 2519B, 2952) that stands on the mound above the valley in the form of an irregular square, as well as Building M (17.30 × 10.70m), can be dated to the same period. The latter was later integrated into the sanctuary's circuit wall together with the *bouleuterion* (council house) (E2) and the *prytaneion* (meeting place for officials) (O), a development that suggested its use as a public guest house (Lyrou 2009: 126).

In the late fourth/beginning of the third century BC, the so-called oikoi (Buildings Γ, 9.80 × 9.40m, and Λ, 4.70 × 8.70m; Dieterle 2007: 130; Emmerling 2012; Mancini 2013a: 84–88; Georgoulas 2016: 47; Piccinini 2016: 164) were erected near the Sacred House. These have been assigned to Dione and Aphrodite respectively (Dakaris 1998: 50, 55–56), who were also known as 'Naoi gods', meaning gods who shared the same house (*synoikoi*) and temple (*synnaioi*), similar to Zeus (Dione and Aphrodite are referred to with these adjectives in the corpus of the lead tablets, DVC 95A, 799B, 1559B, 2546A). According to excavations during the decade of 2000, Building Λ (the so-called temple of Aphrodite) had two phases: during the first (in the first quarter of the fourth century BC), it consisted of a cella; and in the second phase (during the beginning of the third century BC), two Doric columns were added to its entrance (Skalisti and Georgoulas 2014: 98–99; Mancini 2021: 216–24).

The monumentalization of the sanctuary took concrete form during Pyrrhus' reign (318–272 BC) (Meyer 2015: 310). New buildings were erected: edifices A (9.50 × 16.50m, known as the 'Temple of Heracles'), Θ (6.05 × 9.40m, known as the 'New Temple of Dione'), and Z (6.25 × 9.70m, known as the 'Temple of Themis'). After the destruction of the sanctuary by the Aetolians in 219/218 BC, the Sacred House was renovated. The small temple was replaced by a larger Ionic temple (5.60 × 12.95m) with four columns in the front. The colonnades were restored. The old material was used in the foundations of the monumental new Hellenistic temple, built so that it was exactly symmetrical.

Of special interest is the discussion that has arisen in recent years about the identification of Buildings A, Γ, Z, Θ, and Λ as *thesauroi* (treasuries). The only well-founded identification was that of Building E with the Sacred House. Quantin (1999; 2008: 20–29) was the first to support the argument that the smaller buildings played the role of *thesauroi*, similar to those in Olympia and Delphi. Mancini (2013a: 81ff.; 2021: 480–98) and Piccinini (2016: 162–63) supported this interpretation, while Emmerling (2012: 201–10) added that the buildings could have been used as reception halls. Building A (the so-called Heracles' temple) is differentiated from the others due to its large dimensions (it is the largest prostyle temple-like building in all of Epirus) and the use of architectural sculptures (Katsikoudis 1997: 255–64; Mancini 2013b).

Besides the deities already mentioned, the worship of other gods and goddesses at the Panhellenic sanctuary of Dodona is attested through literary and epigraphic evidence, and especially lead oracular tablets published by Dakaris, Vokotopoulou and Christidis (2013) (Demeter (DVC 295B, 1025A-B, 2264, 3092B); Isis (DVC 2327A); Apollo (DVC 224A, 2726A, 2964B); Asclepius (DVC 3741B); Dionysus (DVC 1025A-B)).

Rhodotopi: Passaron was, until the fourth century BC, the religious and political centre of the lead Epirotic *ethnos* (people). There, according to the ancient writer Plutarch: 'It was customary for the kings, after sacrificing to Zeus Areius at Passaron, a place in the Molossian land, to exchange solemn oaths with the Epirots, the kings swearing to rule according to the laws, and the people to maintain the kingdom according to the law' (Plut, *Pyrrhus.* 5.2).

The remains of a peripteral Ionic temple (19.30 × 11m), dated to the Hellenistic period (end of fourth century BC/late third century BC, according to Mancini 2016; 2018; 2021: 51–87) and found in the plain of Rhodotopi, near the city of Ioannina, were attributed to Areius Zeus (Evangelidis 1935; 1952) (Fig. 5.5a). It was destroyed by the Romans (167 BC) but restored sometime before the Imperial period and remained in use until the late Roman period, as attested by the finds (i.e. Roman capitals and a headless statue of Octavian). The building seems to have two phases (Fig. 5.5b). During the first phase (fourth century BC), it consisted of a simple cella and presented close similarity to the *naiskoi* (small temples) of Dodona (Evangelidis 1952: 307; Pliakou 2018: 145; Mancini 2021: 59–62). In its second phase it preserved an anteroom and a cella, while to the east of the anteroom there is a paved courtyard with traces of a shrine and an altar, as well as the remains of a pedestal. In the northwest corner of the temple, a burial enclosure was identified, in which two looted graves were found.

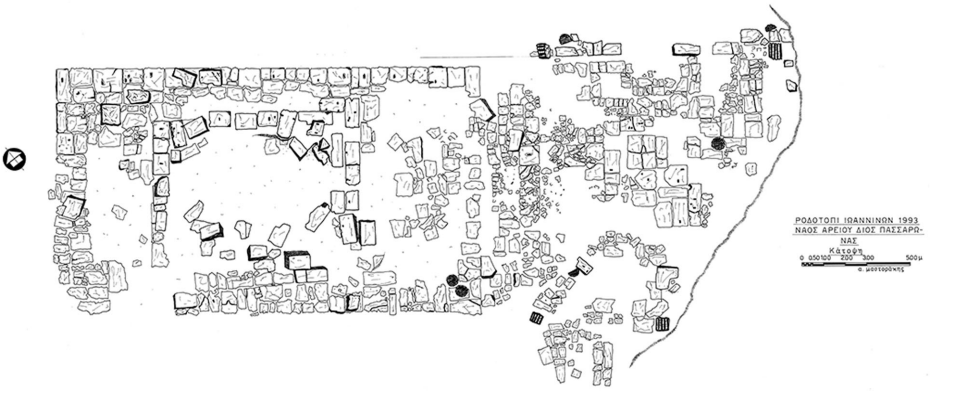


Fig. 5.5a. Aerial view of the temple of Areius Zeus, Rhodotopi. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina.

Fig. 5.5b. Layout of the temple of Areius Zeus, Rhodotopi. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina.

The temple's identification was based on Plutarch's text along with the discovery of an inscribed relief representing a young man (Zeus?) standing in a chariot drawn by felines (Dakaris 1956: 46–80; Oikonomides 1987: 121–24; Burzacchini 1999: 127–34; Katsikoudis 2001: 206–16). The relief is dated to the second half of the fourth century BC, while the inscription ('Αρὰ | τῷ Διὶ| οὗ βέλο[ς] | διίπτατ[αι]- 'the bolt of Zeus flies through') seems to be later and related to the invasion of the Epirots at Thermos of Aitoloakarnania (217 BC) (Katsikoudis 2001). However, the discovery of a respectful group of female clay figurines (Zachos 2016: 101–7), along with a group of loom weights and an inscription, on which the name of Artemis Hegemone is referred, led Pliakou to the hypothesis that the temple was devoted to Artemis (Pliakou 2007: 91–100; 2010: 419; 2011: 92–93, 96; Mancini 2021: 66). It has also been argued that, at some point, Zeus and his daughter were worshipped there (Chapinal-Heras 2019: 157). The cult of Artemis, as we shall see, was very dispersed in Epirus and related to her role as the protector of streets and crossroads.

Dourouti: The site of **Dourouti** (ID18260) is located at the southern outskirts of Ioannina, on a hill (550–555m in height) close to the campus of the University of Ioannina (Andreou and Gravani 1997; Mancini 2021: 48–50). There, the archaeologists uncovered a

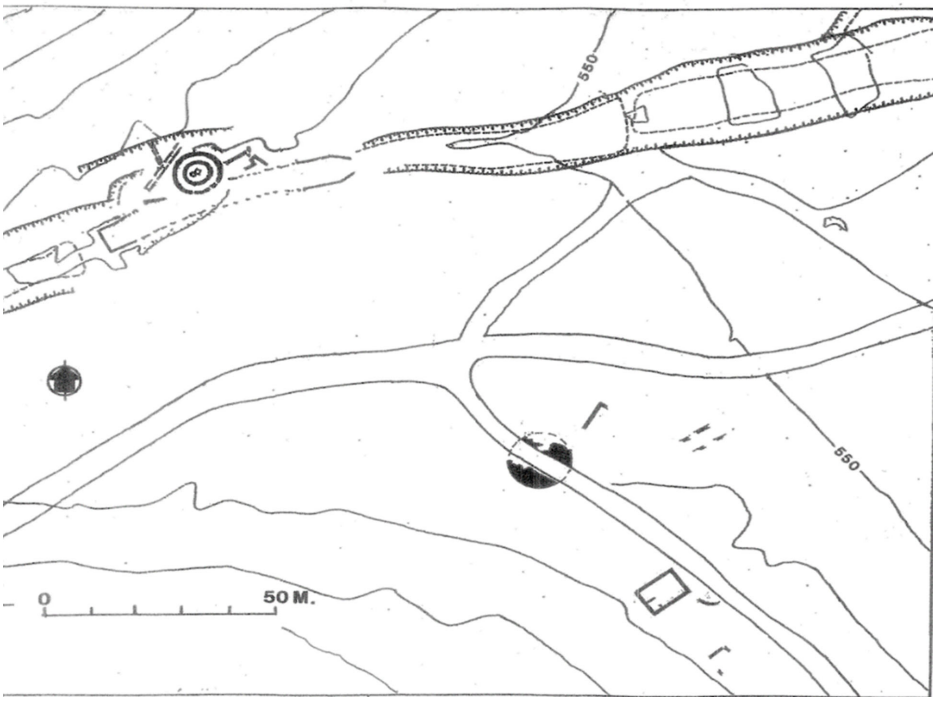


Fig. 5.6. Topographical plan of the Sanctuary of Dourouti. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina.

cemetery (ninth to fourth centuries BC) and a sanctuary composed of two complexes, North and South (Fig. 5.6). It seems to have been in use mainly from the early fourth to the third century BC. Its abandonment has been associated with the foundation of the temple of Zeus Areius at Rodotopi (Gravani 2014: 254).

The North complex consists of some circular and orthogonal structures made of local limestone. A circular building (10.50m in diameter) has been identified by the excavators as a *thesmophorion* (a cultic building often associated with the rites of Demeter). Inside, the investigation brought to light a quadrilinear hearth-altar and an empty circular pit. In the South complex, 100m to the south, part of a curvilinear wall, an orthogonal building, and a paved circular platform have been revealed.

The excavators support the theory that Demeter and Kore were worshipped at Dourouti based on: the type of constructions (e.g. *thesmophorion*); the character of the findings (female figurines bearing either a torch or a phiale and a bronze plaque depicting both goddesses bearing a torch and a sceptre); the topography of the area (near a water source); and a written testimony (a lead tablet from Dodona refers to a sanctuary of Demeter near the lake (AMI 8998; Lhôte 2006: 231). This identification, however, is under discussion (Pliakou 2007: 161–63; Chapinal-Heras 2021: 146). So too is the excavators' suggestion that an open-air sanctuary devoted to a chthonic deity pre-existed there based on the nature of worship and some earlier findings (mainly fragments of handmade pottery) (Gravani 2014: 254). In general, it seems that the sanctuary of Dourouti was an urban sanctuary situated on the road leading to Dodona from the basin of Ioannina. The excavations at the site restarted in 2023 by the University of Ioannina and they will hopefully offer more evidence about the nature of the deity worshipped (https://acw.hist-arch.uoi.gr/anaskafes-erevnes/anaskafi-dourouti).

Giourganista: A small scale investigation in 2008 on the hill of Ai-Lias near the village of **Giourganista** (ID2519, ID9498) led to the discovery of a number of Hellenistic terracotta figurines (fourth to third centuries BC), iron and bronze objects (mainly rings), sherds of pottery, coins, and an inscription, which attest to the presence of a rural shrine probably devoted to Artemis or Aphrodite (Faklari 2008: 768–69; 2022: 185–96).

Vaxia: The site of **Vaxia**, at the eastern part of mount Driskos, is located at the crossroads which connected the Ioannina basin with Ambracia (south), Thessaly (east), and Apollonia (north). A great number of female terracotta figurines attributed to Aphrodite by Hammond (1967: 179–81) or to Artemis/Hekate by Tzouvara-Souli (1979: 81), several bronze, glass, and iron objects, and a crystal gemstone are thought to come from there. The presence of some fragments of flower-shaped foreheads of antefixes led to the assumption that a rural shrine functioned somewhere in the area (Dakaris 1991: 14) parallel to the one at Giourganista.

Indications for ritual activity are also noted at the sites of **Ktismata** (ID9458) (Kleitsas 2010: 240; Dominguez-Monedero 2022a: 474), **Mousiotitsa** (ID9344; Katsadima 1997: 559; Georgoulas and Skalisti 2022: 108), **Pesta** (ID3154; Adam, Georgoulas and Giovanopoulou 2003), **Psina** (Hammond 1967: 190; Nakas 2016: 426, 430–34; Gerogiannis 2021: 303–06), **Rachi Platanias** (ID3104) (Pliakou 2007: 169; 2018: 138), and **Votonosi** (Verdélis 1949; Vokotopoulou 1975).

Preveza

Cassope: In the Agora of **Cassope** (ID2536), in front of the West Stoa, excavations have brought to light a paved outdoor area (35.5 × 6.80m) enclosed by a series of stone orthostats (0.70m high). This space probably functioned as a shrine (Kontogianni 2006: 39; Aggeli 2015a: 50–51). To the east of it lies a row of statue bases and a large monolithic base, while in the open space three successive stone altars have been found. The largest (4.17m in length) was dedicated to Zeus Soter (end of fourth to beginning of third century BC) (Tzouvara-Souli 1994: 113). Along the northern stoa on the western side of the Agora, an inscribed stone base, which once supported a bronze statue, has been discovered. It was a dedication of three warriors from Cassope to Heracles Soter after their participation as Roman allies in the war against Aristonikos (*ca.* 130 BC; Domiguez-Monedero 2017). Within the walls at the southwestern extreme of the city, a Macedonian style tomb, dated to 370 BC, has been identified as a heroön cenotaph for Cassope's founder (Dakaris 1971: 122–23; Dominguez-Monedero 2017: 86).

Outside the city wall lies a peripteral Doric temple (10.50 × 17.20m) attributed to Aphrodite, the guardian goddess of the Cassopeans (Fig. 5.7). According to the German architects W. Hoepfner and E.-L. Schwandner, the building material from this temple was transferred to Nikopolis when the inhabitants were forced to abandon their city in the first century AD (Kontogianni 2006: 35; Aggeli 2015a: 64). The name of the deity also appears on a votive inscription found at the *katagogeion* (guesthouse) of the city (Tzouvara-Souli 1994: 109–12) and she is depicted in the numismatic circulations of the city.

Nekromanteion:

> There into Acheron the river of pain two streams flow, Pyriphlegethon blazing with fire, and Cocy-tos resounding with lamentation, which is a branch of the hateful eater of Styx: a rock is there, by which the two roaring streams unite.
>
> (*Odyssey* 10.510–13; transl. W.H.D. Rouse)

According to ancient texts (*Odyssey* 10.510–13; Herodotus 5.92; Pausanias 9.30.6), the oldest and most renowned Greek Oracle of the Dead (*Nekromanteion*) was in Thesprotia, near the Acheron River and the Aornos Lake. On a hill near the Mesopotamos Village in Preveza,

Fig. 5.7. The temple of Aphrodite, Cassope Preveza. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Preveza.

close to the junction of the Kokytos, Vouvos, and Acheron rivers, a labyrinthine fortified building complex came to light (Fig. 5.8). It was identified as the *Nekromanteion* or *Nekyomanteion* (prophecy place of the dead) of Acheron (Dakaris 1962; 1963; 1972: 179–81; 1993; Aggeli 2015b; Voulgaraki 2017; Gravani and Katsikoudis 2019). Hades and Persephone were the presiding deities. A different reading of the building identifies it with a fortified farm rather than a *Nekromanteion* (Baatz 1979; 1982; 1999; Kotjambopoulou 2018). The complex was established during the late fourth and early third century BC. It was destroyed by the Romans in 167 BC and reused during the first century BC. Later, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Monastery of Agia Ioannis was erected on top of it.

Apart from a few ceremonial objects (a group of clay female figurines attributed to Persephone and a group of elaborate vases, Tzouvara-Souli 1979: 103–4; 2019), many farming tools, cooking vessels, and implements were discovered dating from the fourth to the second centuries BC. Within the central hall, numerous bronze and iron objects have been found. They had fallen from the upper storey when its floor collapsed during the 167 BC devastation. According to the German archaeologist Dietwulf Baatz (1982), these implements belonged to seven small catapults and were used in sieges by both attackers and defenders.

The central hall is surrounded by a rectangular precinct of polygonal masonry (62.40 × 46.30m) built in local limestone. The complex has a rectangular ground plan divided into two parts: eastern (late fourth to early third century BC) and western (late third to early second century BC). In the eastern part, a square tower-shaped construction (21.30 × 21.65m) is surrounded by corridors and square spaces. Its external walls are over three metres thick and preserved at a height of over three metres. The construction is divided into a central hall (15 × 4.25m) and two tripartite spaces consisting of six square rooms (4.40m in length). Underneath the central hall lies an elaborate subterranean crypt, 'the hall of the underworld'. The pilgrims had to be prepared physically and mentally before entering this hall (Ogden 2001: 174). An encounter with the image of the dead (probably a priest) was suspended from the ceiling with the aid of an elaborate machine (Dakaris 1964: 46). The roof of the vaulted underground hall was supported by 15 successive arches based on pillars. According to researchers from the University of Thessaloniki, the acoustic of the hall was exceptional (Karampatzakis and Zafranas 2009). The construction of an anechoic chamber was intentional in order to create a terrifying silence, characteristic of the 'Dead's World', a world void of light and sound.

Fig. 5.8. The 'Hall of the Underworld', Nekromanteion, Preveza. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Preveza.

The west wing consisted of a central courtyard surrounded by rectangular or square rooms. It was the only part of the complex reused after the destruction of Epirus by the Romans in 167 BC.

Thesprotia

The earliest religious site of the Thesprotian *ethnos* is dated to the late seventh century BC and it was excavated on the **Mastilitsa** Hill during 2000–2001 (Tzortzatou and Fatsiou 2009). A rectangular building (13.80 × 9.50m) surrounded by a wing, with a possible altar and evidence for sacrifices, has been identified as a shrine dedicated to an unknown deity (Tzortzatou and Fatsiou 2009: 46–50) (Fig. 5.9). It remained in use until the beginning of the Hellenistic period.

All the temples in Thesprotia are located inside the known urban centres except the one at **Kyra Panagia** (ID8910), near Paramythia. It was revealed at the end of the 1990s (1997–1999) and can be dated to the early fifth century BC, based on the findings. It thrived between the late fourth and beginning of the third century BC (Preka-Alexandri 1997: 610; Riginos 1998: 539–40; Svana 2004: 211–13; Riginos and Lazari 2007: 90–92, 95–96; Mancini 2021: 296–305). The rural sanctuary consisted of a small rectangular temple (an oikos) and an altar (Fig. 5.10). The majority of the findings were terracotta figurines (standing women, *hydrophoroi* (water-carriers), female busts, seated women, a banqueter, a woman leaning on a statue), while coins (of late Classical and Hellenistic period), miniature vases (Hellenistic period), jewellery, and pottery have also been found (Svana 2009: 89). According to Svana (2009: 93), the sanctuary was devoted to Persephone, and it functioned as a meeting point for the rural populations living around the Kokytos River in unfortified settlements (*komai*).

Gitana: The ancient city of **Gitana** (ID17711) is located on the southwestern part of the Vrysella Hillock in the Thesprotia prefecture. It was the second capital of the Thesprotians,

Fig. 5.9. Aerial view of the temple at Mastilitsa. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Thesprotia.

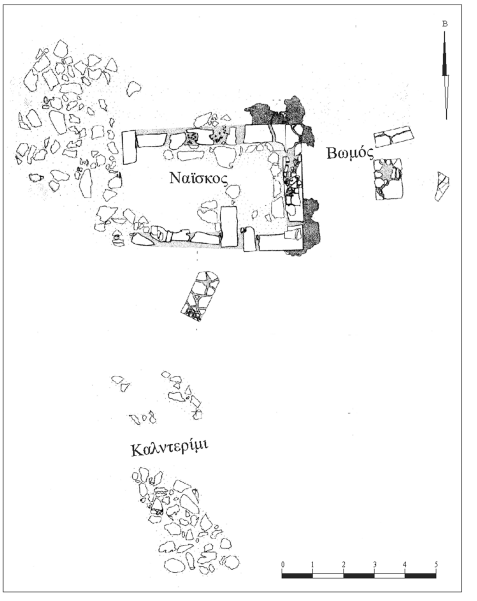


Fig. 5.10. Layout of the temple at Kyra Panagia. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Thesprotia.

surrounded by a wall with a perimeter of about 2,400m and the seat of their *koinon* (federation) (mid-fourth century BC). The systematic excavations started in the 1990s (1986–1997), while later restoration and enhancement works took place in two phases (2003–2009 and 2015–2022). The town had an organized urban plan. Among other public buildings (the *prytaneion*-archive, the agora, and the theatre), three religious ones were identified at its western part: the temples of Themis and Parthenos and Apollo Agyieus.

Fig. 5.11. The temple of Themis, Gitana Thesprotia. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Thesprotia.

A large public building (36 × 25m), referred to in the literature as 'Building B', has been identified as the temple of Themis based mainly on epigraphic evidence (Preka-Alexandri 2018; Rinaldi 2020: 82–84) (Fig. 5.11). Themis' worship in Gitana was testified by the discovery of a decree (mid-fourth century BC) in the region of Kalama's dyke (Preka-Alexandri 2018: 310–11). Building B seems to have functioned as a mint at some stage, based on the metal coin blanks found there. It has an oblong rectangular layout, partially roofed. Its entrance is located on its east side and was equipped with double external walls. The fact that it had a peristyle around a large open-air court was interpreted as an indication that it could host large crowds. The objects strictly connected to the rite found there are the following: a group of inscribed roof tiles bearing the name of Themis (.ΕΜΙΤΟΣ), some lamps, and a handle of an iron sword interpreted as a symbol of the goddess (Preka-Alexandri 2018: 312–14). Moreover, two bronze flan coins and a number of unworked metal objects have been associated with Themis' cult. Themis was a deity known in the region of Epirus. She was also worshipped at Dodona, as evidenced by a small temple attributed to her and four lead oracular tablets (DVC 128A, 1006B, 2525B, 3355A).

The so-called 'Small Temple' was excavated during 1986–1989 and was identified as the temple of Parthenos based on inscriptional evidence (Preka-Alexandri 2019: 179; Mancini 2021: 344–61) (Fig. 5.12). A stone headless female figurine of the Pudicitia (personification of female modesty) type (0.38m in height) bore an inscription on its base, based on which Philo dedicated the figurine to the Parthenos: [Π]ΑΡΘΕΝΩΙ ΦΙΛΩ [Κ]ΑΤΑ ΟΡΑΜΑ. The statuette is dated to around the second half of the second century BC thanks to a coin of Ptolemy IV Philopator, which was found underneath it. The temple seems to have two Doric columns in the porch (*distyle in antis*, a pair of columns inbetween two side walls extending to the front of the porch), and it had three phases (Preka-Alexandri and Nakasis 2018: 737, 752). It was built of local limestone and consisted of a pronaos (3.90 × 6.15m) and a cella (7.40 × 6.15m). The altar was situated at about 7m from the temple. Between them, a terrace was formed while both were protected by a stone-built peribolos. Figurines, parts

Fig. 5.12. The 'Small Temple', temple of Parthenos Thesprotia. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Thesprotia.

of statuettes, sherds of vases, loom weights, coins, and antefixes compose the sanctuary's ritual context.

Northeast of and adjacent to the *prytaneion*, Building E, a small, elongated, two-part edifice, has been interpreted as a place of worship for Apollo Agyieus. On its southeastern edge, the discovery of a stone base for the support of a *baetylus* (sacred stone/pillar), along with parts of a manumission decree inscription, supported its identification with a place of worship (Kanta-Kitsou 2008: 50). The cult of Apollo was known in Epirus, as we have already remarked, and it seems that its worship in Thesprotia was due to the influence of the Corinthian colonies.

During the excavation of the city's *prytaneion*, a total of about 4,000 clay sealings came to light. The images and attributes of many known deities have been recognized among them, with the figure of Zeus being the most prevalent. Strangely enough, no sanctuary dedicated to Zeus has been found there (Preka-Alexandri 2019: 182).

In the south part of the *prytaneion*, an altar devoted to Hestia has been revealed; a deity also known in Dodona (DVC 2171A, 3275A), Ambracia, and Nikopolis. The presence of Hestia's altar can be explained by the fact that the 'eternal flame' of the hearth (*estia* in Greek) burned in the *prytaneion* (Preka-Alexandri 2019: 181).

Dymokastro (ancient Elina) (ID3280): The fortified coastal settlement is located on a hill south of Karavostasi Bay. It was established at the end of the fourth century BC and covered an area of 220 acres. Excavation works took place during 2000–2002, while from 2002 to 2008 a large enhancement project was realized. At Acropolis A, two temple-like buildings (oikoi) have been revealed belonging to a shrine enclosed by a peribolos, adjacent to the western side of the city's walls (Lazari, Tzortzatou and Kountouri 2008: 44; Mancini 2017; 2021: 310–28) (Fig. 5.13). The oikoi are divided by a narrow corridor. The largest (the northern one) (6.30 × 9.40m) consists of a pronaos and a cella. The southern oikos had a single room of the same depth as the cella of the northern one, with a socle in polygonal masonry preceded by a long corridor. The northern oikos has been related to a

Fig. 5.13. The oikoi, Acropolis A, Dymokastro Thesprotia. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Thesprotia.

construction interpreted as an altar placed on the axis of its decentralized entrance door (Mancini 2019: 166). The other one has been interpreted as an auxiliary room, perhaps a treasury or a deposit for offerings. A stoa with two rows of wooden columns is probably related to this complex and may have served as a place for religious rituals (Riginos *et al.* 2018: 757). The ritual deposit includes a large *thymiaterion* (incense burner) adorned with Dionysian reliefs and many sculptural fragments, some of which belong to life-size statues (Mancini 2019: 167–70).

At Acropolis B, an enigmatic construction came to light and has been identified as a shrine (Mancini 2019: 171; 2021: 330–40) (Fig. 5.14): a tripartite rectangular building (11 × 8 m) with two auxiliary rooms to the south, and a quadrilinear rock-carved altar to the east (Lazari, Tzortzatou and Kountouri 2008: 84). The main northern entrance is flagged by pilasters. Two small rectangular niches were discovered in the western part of the building. A group of female terracotta figurines, clay moulds, a large quantity of glasses, stone reliefs, bronze objects, and fragments of miniature temple-like buildings form the ritual context of the shrine.

Elea (ID4077): The capital city of the Thesprotian tribe of Eleaens or Eleaets is situated near the modern village of Chrisavgi, known by the name of Velliane. The enhancement works during 2002–2009 in the fortified settlement brought to light ancient streets and buildings of the Classical and Hellenistic periods. A small temple (16.50 × 6.00m), dated between the beginning of the fourth century BC and the second quarter of the second century BC, has been unearthed at the western edge of the northeastern part of the settlement, at a high altitude (Fig. 5.15). It was a tripartite rectangular building with a pronaos, a cella, and an adyton connected by doors. In its centre, an *eschara* (ground altar) was formed for the libations of pilgrims to the unknown deity (Riginos and Lazari 2007: 38–39; Mancini 2021: 290–95).

Fig. 5.14. The 'Shrine', Acropolis B, Dymokastro. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Thesprotia.

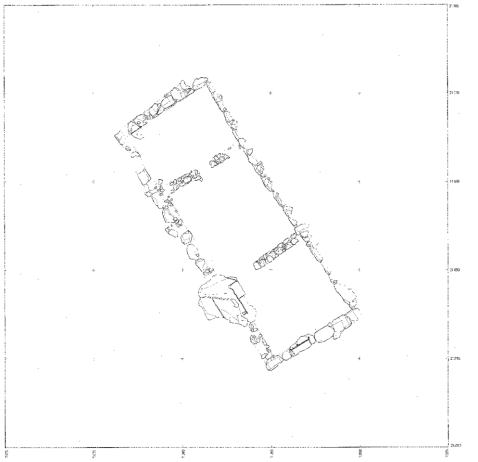


Fig. 5.15. The small temple at Elea. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture: Ephorate of Antiquities of Thesprotia.

Discussion

Following the presentation of the available data, a point worth stressing is that no stone-based, monumental architecture has been noted in Epirus before the fourth century BC (Pliakou 2018: 138). Urbanization in Epirus developed at a slower pace compared to the rest of Greece. Communities were formed around clusters of settlements known as *ethne*. The fourth century BC was the period when the first poleis appeared. The Epirots, under the leadership of the Aeakid dynasty, organized into an alliance (Betsiou 2020, 146–49) and later *a koinon*, and began to establish a regional identity (Meyer 2013; Raynor 2017). 'It took time, practice in cooperation, a religious center important to the entire region, and

inspired leadership for the inhabitants of the larger area known as Epirus to come to see themselves as a single *ethnos* and make for themselves a system of communal governance' (Meyer 2015: 300). The degree of social complexity directly affected the formation of the ritual institutions and the regulations. The severe architecture of the buildings and their simplicity seems to indicate a desire among the inhabitants to connect themselves to a perceived territorial homeland. The dominant form of the religious buildings with a small cella and a pronaos is probably an act of conservatism – a means linking the present to the past. People show a preference to minimization. Buildings were characterized by paucity of large-scale architecture. Peripteral temples were scantily represented (temple of Apollo (Ambracia), temple of Areius Zeus (Rhodotopi), temple of Aphrodite (Cassope)). It must be noted that in Thesprotia a peripteral temple has not been recorded and the majority of sacred buildings belong to the type of oikos with a closed façade (Mancini 2019: 167). Moreover, the structures were constructed using a building technique that combines stone with light materials (timber, mud-bricks, etc.), while in Molossia they were usually built with polygonal masonry (Mancini 2019: 171).

Dodona had a Panhellenic character (from the sixth century BC) and, at a specific chronological moment (mainly during Pyrrhus' reign), an international one. The Hellenization process took more concrete form during Pyrrhus' reign through the construction of large buildings associated with the political function of the sanctuary (*bouleuterion*, theatre, *prytaneion*, stoai; Moustakis 2006: 115; Lang 2019: 39). During the Hellenistic period, the sanctuary attracted non-Greek pilgrims with (a) the Naia Festival (Cabanes 1988; Katsikoudis 2020; Dominguez-Monedero 2022b), organized every four years and constituting dramatic and athletic contests, and (b) the operation of the oracle (consecrations by regional or international Greek states; Quantin 2024: 416). Through the corpus of the lead oracular tablets, recently inscribed in the UNESCO's list 'Memory of the World', we can garner information about the nationality of the people who visited the oracle. Based on the references to cities or broader regions and the dialects in which the enquiries have been written, it can be inferred that the majority came from Epirus, but a significant number were from the Ionian islands, Italy, Illyria, Acarnania, Aetolia, Thessaly, Macedonia, Thrace, Euboea, Boeotia, Attica, Peloponnese, Aegean Islands, and Asia Minor (Georgoulas 2023).

As Marinatos (1993: 182) aptly points out, 'Sanctuaries were multidimensional institutions which served the needs of their communities and the needs of the Greek city-states as a whole'. The sanctuary of Dodona acted as a religious and political centre (Moustakis 2006; Meyer 2013; 2015: 309; Piccinini 2017), as noted by the fact that public decisions have been displayed at the western stoa of Dodona (Davies 2000: 252; Katsikoudis 2019: 32). Moreover, Pyrrhus manipulated Dodona in order to demonstrate power, symbolism, and political propaganda (Gorrini and Zizza 2018: 209). He, as the heir and successor of Achilles through Neoptolemus, and after his victory over the Macedonians at the Aoos straits (274 BC), dedicated their shields at Dodona while he managed to materialize Alexanders' programme of renovating the sanctuary. The erection of the temple of Hercules (Building A) aimed to connect the Aeakids with the Macedonians through their mythical progenitor and the promotion of Pyrrhus' victories against the Romans (Katsikoudis 1997: 268; Kittelä 2013: 41–42). The impact of politics in religion can also be seen in the case of the temple of Areius Zeus at Rhodotopi through the oath sworn by the king of the Molossians (for its content, look at the Ioannina section) according to Plutarch and through the dedication of public decrees there (i.e. the decree of Aterargoi, Archaeological Museum of Ioannina (AMI) 399, late third/early second century BC; Pliakou 2011: 93–94).

Epirots worshipped the same deities as the rest of the Greeks. Their cult was characterized by the presence of two ritualistic layers: one relates to the Mother Goddess, who was later succeeded by Zeus and Dione (at least at Dodona) and the other preserves characteristics of Homeric or pre-Homeric cult practices owing to the effect of the Corinthian and the Elean colonies. There are three groups of deities venerated in Epirus:

local, regional (Hellenic), and international. The dominant deity was Zeus, while the female element also prevails in most of the sites. Artemis seems to have a prominent role in the religious procedure. Her cult was introduced over the period of the Corinthian colonization in Ambracia (seventh century BC; Tzouvara-Souli 1979: 18). It was revamped after Pyrrhus' campaign in Epirus, based on the deity's representation on a series of bronze coins, issued by the Epirote Alliance (Betsiou 2020: 61). Sometimes Artemis' manifestation coincides with Hekate's manifestation, since both protect people en route. Artemis' name is also referred to in the corpus of oracular lead tablets (DVC 540A, 541B, 1012A, 3192A, 3393A; Lhôte 2006, no. 142). The epithet Hegemone for Artemis is referred to in two inscriptions, one lead tablet (fourth to third centuries BC; Lhôte 2006: 142) and a stone inscription from Rhodotopi (second century BC), both associated with the existence of a temple there (Chapinal-Heras 2018). According to the literary sources, it seems that there was a temple of Artemis Hegemone in Ambracia where Deidameia, the last queen of the Epirots, was assassinated (Polyen, *Strategemes*, 8.52.1; Antonius Liberalis, *Metamorphoseon Synagoge* 4.5). A temple of Artemis must have functioned in Thesprotia, in the region of Photike, according to a Latin inscription. Additionally, a torso of a female statue was found dating to the beginning of the second century BC (Quantin 2010: 436). The shrine at Vaxia is also attributed to Artemis, as well as the temple of Parthenos at Gitana (Quantin 1999: 69, 78; for her identification with Themis, see Mancini 2021). Artemis as Pasikrata is referred to on two votive documents, one from Ambracia and the other from Panagia near Preveza (AMI 5054, first century BC; Tzouvara-Souli 1979: 25). Most of the sanctuaries attributed to Artemis are located at liminal locations (i.e. Rhodotopi, Vaxia) as she was the deity protector of routes and crossroads (Chapinal-Heras 2019: 161).

Estia and Themis were the prevalent deities in Gitana, while several shrines are connected to Demeter and Kore (Dourouti, Vaxia, Nekromanteion, Kyra Panagia). Regarding international deities, we should note the Egyptian gods, whose worship has been testified in Ambracia (Tzouvara-Souli 1992: 175–79), as well as Amphrodite Aineias in Dodona and Ambracia, a cult introduced there probably by Pyrrhus after his campaign in Italy (Katsikoudis 1997: 271–72).

Conclusion

Earliest attestations of worship from Dodona come from the Geometric period (Vasileiou 2019). The singularities of religious life there are closely linked to the social and political particularities of the region. Most of the religious buildings date to the fourth/third centuries BC, which is indicative of their simultaneous architectural development and typological uniformity. Organized sanctuaries can be traced only in Molossia (Dodona, Rhodotopi, Dourouti; with the exception probably of the *Nekromanteion*, if one accepts Dakaris' identification). Periodical festivals must have been organized, in which the local population participated. This empowered their bonds and played an important role in the negotiation of group identities. At the large Thesprotian cities, religious activity is detected mainly near the centre.

During the Geometric and Archaic period, female and chthonic deities prevailed. However, after the colonization of coastal areas by the Eleans and the Corinthians, the Epirots adopted the Greek-Olympian gods. During the Hellenistic period, new cults made their appearance.

Following all the above, it can be concluded that a systematic examination of all the available material (archaeological, epigraphic, numismatic, literary, architectural) will shed light on the mystery of the Epirotic '*loci sancti*'.

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