Introduction: Contexts and Chronotopes

Esther Eidinow

The essays in this volume are one of the outcomes of a meeting of ancient historians, assembled as part of the research process for the AHRC-funded Virtual Reality Oracle (VRO) project.[1] Participants were asked to contribute to the development of the project by exploring understandings of, and approaches to, analysing, the different aspects of the 'experience' of visiting Dodona as an ancient pilgrim, with particular attention to the embodied experience of visiting the site, encompassing physical, mental and emotional responses. The workshop supported the creators of the VRO in depicting in VR a fully realized, embodied experience, which evoked, as far as possible, its different, interactive and dynamic dimensions. It also served to reinforce the point that the evidence for activities at Dodona is fragmentary, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory, something the organizers of the project crucially acknowledged: indeed, this was one of the reasons for developing it in the first place. In holding this research workshop, we were interested in the nuances of and differences between, as much as commonalities and the integration of, research approaches and insights.

By focusing on 'experience', and recognizing the complexity of that concept, the VRO project built on current research in ancient religion, including work on lived experience, cognitive approaches (including research into the senses), emotions research and environmental research, alongside new approaches to ancient oracular consultation.[2] Indeed, it did not, in the first instance, even highlight the idea that visitors would have a 'religious experience' at Dodona. Rather, while the aim was to understand the perceived role of the divine at this site, the creators of the project

[1] The Virtual Reality Oracle (VRO) project ran from June 2020 to August 2023, inclusive, and was funded by the AHRC: AH/T004673/1. The website containing teaching resources and links to the downloadable VR apps (on Meta or Google Play) is: http://vroracle.co.uk

[2] For example: Rüpke 2016, Larson 2016, Eidinow 2018, Eidinow, Geertz and North 2022, Driediger-Murphy and Eidinow 2019, Graham 2020, Frigerio 2023.

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resisted an approach that assumes that particular phenomena can simply be labelled as 'religious experience', lest it seem to indicate that there are universal religious phenomena. Instead, the project asked how different cultures – indeed, how different individuals – may have developed different interpretations of the same phenomena,[3] understanding that 'experience' involves the social and embodied (the latter encompassing both mind and body) context in which a human subject interacts with the world around them.[4]

Thus, both the organizers and the participants at the meeting, were looking to better understand what we may call the 'affordances' offered by the site – that is, how the physical site was entangled with the embodied human mind to create, in and through that relationship, both existence and meaning.[5] From the very beginning, even in the early design phase, this project was not primarily focussed on recreating the ancient site; it was not intended to be an experience of the architecture of a sanctuary.[6] Instead, we wanted to evoke an experience of the ancient world through allusions to the stories of the visitors to the site – we aimed to raise questions about subjective historical experience by creating a convincing reality for a modern visitor to that ancient site.[7]

For this to be possible, the site needed to be explored from many different – and interacting – perspectives. As a first step, we needed to locate the material elements of the sanctuary: for example, the site's environment, including the position and impact of the surrounding landscape, the flora and fauna and local weather systems; the topography of the sanctuary, including the buildings that may have been in place, the offerings that may have been set out or stored. At another level, we then needed to understand something of the relationship of a pilgrim with this environment – how a body may have been shaped by the site, through the requirements of a ritual, for example – and, in turn, how the bodies of pilgrims may have shaped the site through their engagement with the sanctuary landscape.

Following this, the interaction of these different levels also required investigation. As a brief example of this, we might consider a thought

[3] Eidinow, Geertz and North 2022. See on religious experience, Taves 2009.
[4] Eidinow et al. 2022.
[5] See Gibson 1979, Jensen and Greve 2019, Malafouris 2019; discussed in more detail in Eidinow 2023.
[6] These ideas were a key part of the proposal AHRC: AH/T004673/1. They also structured the prototype of the project, comprising films in 360-degree format, available https://oraclevisit.blogs.bristol.ac.uk.
[7] As Eidinow 2022.

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experiment of some of the various affordances of rainfall. At Dodona, scholarship has suggested, there were very high levels of rainfall:[8] in terms of its role in helping us to understand the lived experience of an ancient pilgrim, we might see this simply as a historical fact about rainfall; we might reflect on how it may have influenced the layout of parts of the site, the architecture, the storage of materials. We might explore how it changed an experience of temporality: did it influence when and how particular rituals or festivals were held? And, finally, for some of those ancient pilgrims, was rainfall synonymous with Zeus? And did it then become part of a story of their visit, told and retold, in which they had felt the presence of the divine; a story that shaped not only their experience but also the experiences of other pilgrims? This collection of essays reflects this polyvalent structure of inquiry: the individual chapters provide a range of different analyses of the evidence for the site, aiming to develop, overall, a framework for further insight into experience.

As well as exploring the site of Dodona, in publishing these essays, our aim is to bring together what has been, in recent years, a number of themes studied, understandably, somewhat separately in the field of Greek religion. In the first place, scholarship on ancient Greek religion has seen a marked increase in the study of, on the one hand, divinatory practices, and, on the other hand, particular sanctuaries.[9] In contrast, this edited volume on the oracle of Zeus at Dodona in NW Greece explores myriad different dimensions of the sanctuary both as a site and as an oracular sanctuary, building on studies of divination that seek to go beyond functionalist approaches of oracular operations, to consider the experiences of those visiting oracular sanctuaries, including those seeking consultations.[10]

In addition, it encompasses a second set of themes, which also tend to be studied separately, aligning studies of material evidence with a range of theoretical approaches, including cognitive and sensory analyses, along with (as noted above) consideration of 'lived experience' of ancient religion. And, finally, as a third set of themes, this volume introduces questions about the environmental context and (as above) its affordances – asking whether and how these may have been experienced in ways that

[8] Graham and Hintz 2010.

[9] For example, on divination, Johnston 2008, Beerden 2013, Trampedach 2015, Dillon 2017, Woodard 2023; on sanctuaries, for example, (specifically Dodona) Dieterle 2007, Quantin 2008, Emmerling 2012, Mancini 2015, Piccinini 2017, Chapinal-Heras 2021. Delphi offers an exception to this approach: e.g., Bowden 2005 and Scott 2014; see also Frigerio 2023, which sets Apolline divinatory practices in specific contexts. A notable early exception: Günther 1971 on Didyma.

[10] E.g., Maurizio 1995 and 1997, Renberg 2017, Driediger and Eidinow 2019, Frigerio 2023.

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drew individuals and communities into reflection on their role in the cosmos and relations with the divine.

Such an interweaving of different approaches was conceptually essential for building the VRO – which aimed to evoke an individual experience (in all its variety) of visiting the sanctuary. An ancient Greek oracular site comprised an encounter with 'unknowing': the sanctuary was a space to which visitors brought questions concerned with many different areas of their lives, in a structured confrontation with 'unknowing'. In that respect we also drew a parallel with the experience of those who 'visit' the site as researchers: indeed, while Dodona has produced a great deal of certain kinds of evidence – in particular, the oracle question tablets or lamellae – there is plenty about it that remains unclear; sources are incomplete, break off, and contradict themselves; the ritual of divination, the uses of the lamellae remain obscure. The contributors to this volume explore both areas of uncertainty and a variety of approaches that they use in those explorations, as they investigate different dimensions of the possible lived experience of visiting ancient Dodona. But before turning to details of those, I want to pause here to reflect on this process of research, to consider how, in contemplating the way our historical subjects engage with the affordances of their environments, we, in turn, as historians, ourselves engage with the affordances of our historical evidence.

For this, I turn to a concept created by Mikhail Bakhtin, that of the chronotope or 'time-space', but moving beyond the literary confines of his theory to one that, additionally, puts an emphasis on the results of that concept – a heightened understanding of experience.[11] Bakhtin's approach makes explicit and draws together what this volume of essays sets out to explore: the confluence of time and space to create a specific 'world'. And, while Bakhtin's focus was on what is 'artistically expressed in literature', I want to suggest here that such an approach may also offer a powerful lens for reflection on the process of written historical analysis.[12] The concept of the chronotope highlights how we draw on and, in turn, help to create, ideas of particular 'worlds' – and, as such, it offers a useful framework for a set of essays that each, in its different way, is evoking the chronotope of the sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona.

[11] Bakhtin 1981: 84.

[12] In Eidinow forthcoming I explain why I have concluded that the VRO itself – as an embodied experience – is not suitable for analysis as a chronotope.

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Chronotopes for Ancient Sanctuaries

Bakhtin's theory is concerned with 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships' and provides a rich mode of analysis for literary genres, describing particular types of 'worlds' created by those space-time indicators. The development of historical representations, I suggest, also crucially involves the imagination, even as these are developed from historical evidence, since through these activities, 'spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope'.[13] Thus, the theory of the chronotope can be fruitfully brought to bear both on historical texts and, more to the point of this essay, on the historical narratives developed by scholars as they examine those sources. As Bakhtin says, 'The chronotope is where the knots of narrative are tied and untied . . . Thus, the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a centre for concretising representation.'[14]

In considering this time-space interaction, for Bakhtin, in his focus on literature, 'the primary category in the chronotope is time'.[15] This has obvious relevance for the writing of history: our selection of temporal models – whether those emphasize contingency or not – shapes the nature of our historical analysis. But the power of time in the representation of narrative events becomes palpable because it 'occurs within well-delineated spatial areas'.[16] Different chronotopes foreground time and space in different ways, and bring with them different emotional values. Thus, for example, Bakhtin contrasts the chronotope of encounter (wherein the temporal element dominates and which has a high degree of intensity in emotions and values) with the road, which is less intense in these respects but has what he calls a broader scope.[17] Yet, these are also related: encounters often occur on the road, where 'People who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet'; 'The chronotope of the road is both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement'.[18] We might also consider a later chronotope, which Bakhtin identifies as appearing in novels towards the end of the seventeenth century in England: the castle. This brings with it a 'historical

[13] Bakhtin 1981: 84. [14] Bakhtin 1981: 250. [15] Bakhtin 1981: 85. [16] Bakhtin 1981: 250.
[17] Bakhtin 1981: 243. [18] Bakhtin 1981: 243–244.

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intensity', that is, the time of the historical past: not only the 'traces of centuries and generations ... arranged in it in visible form', including architecture, furniture, archives and particular human relationships, such as hereditary rights, but also the 'legends and traditions' that 'animate every corner of the castle and its environs through their constant reminders of past events'.[19]

Indeed, with these examples in mind, it seems possible to suggest here that the 'ancient sanctuary' could itself be regarded as a similar motif or chronotope in its own right. It would indicate a physical space, comprising, perhaps, a Sacred Way leading to a temenos (demarcated sacred land), perhaps with stoas (covered walkways), filled with votive gifts and statuary. But it would also signify an imagined space, comprising a multiplicity of interconnected stories, told and heard through different media over time, and emerging from configurations of relational networks (whose members, in turn, acquire identities through their presence in the stories told and heard about this sanctuary).[20] And, alongside this, as we consider oracular sanctuaries like Dodona, we could add to this a chronotope of 'an encounter with unknowing': in which interactions with the gods potentially made new forms of knowledge available. And, while we are here primarily considering the cultural imaginary of those whose lives were contemporary with these sanctuaries, who were negotiating the different meanings of place and identity offered by these sites, we can also (as above) draw a parallel with the experience of modern visitors to the site. Even as they encounter a physical space, they are also negotiating the imagined spaces of both ancient accounts and modern interpretations.

Thus, the concept of the chronotope may deepen our understanding of the ways in which, as historians, we can and do develop interpretations of the past, through our evocations of the interactions of time and space.[21] Viewing historical texts through the concept of the chronotope prompts questions about human action in time and space, and leads us to explore how historical scholarship identifies, interprets and represents the world and world view of the subjects of its analysis, which stories we choose to tell and how we tell them. Rather than obscuring the historiographical process, I suggest, this perspective on history writing brings to the

[19] Bakhtin 1981: 245–246. [20] See Eidinow forthcoming.

[21] But not only as historians, or not only through written analyses: see Bakhtin's argument, while discussing Kant's 'Trascendental Aesthetics' (p. 85 fn. 2) that space and time are 'forms of the most immediate reality' and that his theory is an 'attempt to show the role these forms play in the process of concrete artistic cognition (artistic visualization)'.

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foreground some important aspects of historical analysis; for example, the ways in which such representations of the ancient world, both ancient and modern, offer opportunities (explicitly or implicitly) to 'meditate on human action in a profoundly ethical fashion'.[22] Thus, the essays in this volume, by investigating the dynamic involvement of mental, emotional, sensory and physical processes for those who visited the site of Dodona, are, I argue, engaging with and generating chronotope(s) of that site. These concatentations of place and time emerge not only through phenomenological detail but also, importantly, by bringing into the foreground a focus on human action; as Bakhtin notes, 'The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic'.[23]

Historical Narratives of Dodona

Building, then, on this idea of the chronotope, I turn now to the essays in this volume, and the ways they can be understood as both drawing on and contributing to a chronotope of 'the Dodona sanctuary' – and, thus, concretizing (and re-concretizing) various different representations of this site. The essays are organized in two sections, 'Site and Senses' and 'Consultation and Cognition', and are arranged so that they offer the reader, first, a more general view of the sanctuary and its artefacts, before gradually 'zooming in', as it were, on experiences.

'Site and Senses' starts with an overview of the development of the site, within the context of the sacred landscape, by one of the VRO project's partners, Eleni Vasileiou from the Ephorate of Antiquities at Ioannina. Synthesizing previous and recent excavation data, '"At a Time When the Temple of Dodonean Zeus Had No Walls": Until the First Century BCE' aims to contextualize the architectural development of the sanctuary of Dodona from prehistory to the first century BCE. It argues that the transformation of the sanctuary of Dodona from a small open-air shrine to a pan-Epirote and pan-Hellenic cult centre seems to be associated with the urbanization of Epirus and the formation of an Epirotic identity. Staying in the Hellenistic period, the next essay of this section, 'Pilgrimage to Dodona: Visibility, Movement, Motivation', by Diego

[22] Bemong, et al. 2010: iv. They draw attention to the ways in which Bakhtin's approach 'addresses not only the perception of the fictional world but also points at the spatial and temporal embedding of human action in order to offer a better understanding of how humans act in their biotopes and semiospheres'.

[23] I understand 'man' here to stand for 'human'.

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Chapinal-Heras, offers the reader a sensory tour of the site. Emphasizing the dynamic nature of such an experience of pilgrimage, and how it will have changed over time in response to changes within the site itself, this essay explores the perceptions of pilgrims, their movement around the sanctuary and the possible motivations behind their visits.

One of the best-known, but mysterious, aspects of the site is the thousands of lead tablets or lamellae that have been found there. Hugh Bowden and Erica Angliker focus on the materiality of the lamellae themselves, offering two complementary perspectives. In 'What Can the Lead Tell Us?', Hugh Bowden considers the tablets in their entirety, drawing on a quantitative analysis of the thousands of lead tablets from the sanctuary, published in 2013 (DVC). Scrutinizing the apparent patterns of their use from the fifth century to the period after 300 BCE, Bowden explores the interactions between these patterns and other patterns of activity (e.g., monumentalization) at the sanctuary. He argues that the monumentalization of the sanctuary in the third century may have made the practice of leaving tablets on display less acceptable; the changing role of the sanctuary may have led to a change in clientele and consultation practice; and the need for lead for the construction of the large stone buildings may have resulted in the melting down of lead tablets, with more recent tablets being disproportionately affected.

Moving from this broader viewpoint, to consider 'Material Insights: The Tablets of Dodona as Objects', Erica Angliker then brings our attention to the physical properties of the lamellae and the contexts in which they were used during the Archaic period. Looking at the tablets as individual items, and drawing on recent work on the materiality of writing, she explores their physical properties. The fact that lead can be inscribed, folded and transported, she argues, made this material more suitable for the context of the sanctuary than, for example, ostraca (pottery shards), another inexpensive medium often used for writing in ancient Greece.

Finally, in this section, Katerina Kolotourou focuses on the sense of sound at Dodona. In 'Soundscape and Religious Experience at Dodona', Kolotourou investigates the likely sonic experiences that were specific to the soundscape of Dodona, including both the natural environment and bronze artefacts. She considers the potential interaction of such a soundtrack with the process of consultation and interrogates the possible auditory experiences of, and their consequences for, the pilgrims. Based on the symbolic and sound properties of the bronze artefacts dedicated at Dodona, she suggests that the soundscape at Dodona invited a form of ecstasy or meditation, with the potential to alter the focus of attention and

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consciousness, thus allowing for new forms of knowledge to become available.

Kolotourou raises the question of the role of sound in the construction and perception of divine entities, and this is the primary focus of the second section of the volume, 'Consultation and Cognition'. The essays in this section of the book concentrate on the activities in the sanctuary that related to divination: here, too, we find a wealth of questions. The evidence for divinatory activity at Dodona is rich but far from easy to interpret. Certainly, there are myriad references to the oracle in Greek literature from Homer onwards; we have a first-hand account from Herodotus, who claims to have visited the sanctuary and talked to the priestesses there. But no literary source provides any clear information about how the oracle functioned; we have multiple versions of the ritual, across different sources, and yet the exact workings of this aspect of the sanctuary experience remain mysterious. What we do have are thousands of lead tablets inscribed, for the most part, with questions that were asked of the oracle. Over 4,000 texts from these tablets were published in 2013,[24] and they make clear that the oracle was consulted by a very wide range of people: both men and women, representatives of cities and private individuals, and even enslaved people. This broad range of visitors to Dodona would have had a similarly wide range of experiences during the time they spent in the sanctuary.

With advances in sensory and cognitive approaches to ancient religious experience, we can no longer suppose that divination was a purely mental or a purely physical experience: it was an embodied experience that drew on mind, body, body-in-the-world and the affordances of that world in order to derive meaning.[25] The essays in the second section of this volume, 'Consultation and Cognition', take a variety of approaches to exploring the evidence for cognitive activity in the process of oracular consultation. It begins with two essays that offer a broader perspective on the cultural expectations involved in the ancient experience of consultation. In the first essay of this section, Pierre Bonnechere focuses on 'The Lost "Instructions for Use" of Dodonaean Lamellae' and offers a reappraisal of the evidence. The lamellae offer a unique resource in the history of Greek divination: among 4000 edited Dodonaean texts, ranging in date from the Archaic to the Hellenistic era, approximately 1500 can be analysed. Nevertheless, this material does not provide us with the basic information about the process of consultation – and we do not know how the consultation procedure was organized, or what was the role of the lamellae. Bonnechere turns to the

[24] DVC. [25] Eidinow 2018.

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tablets themselves to try to answer these basic questions – and emerges with some significant clarifications of how these texts may have been involved in the consultations at Dodona.

Moving from the operation of consultation to its role in the cultural imaginary, Jessica Piccinini explores the evidence for consultations of Dodona found in ancient Greek drama. In 'Master of Clarity: The Utterances of Zeus Dodonaios in Fifth-Century Tragedy', she explores how these oracular utterances were worded, as attested in ancient drama; whether they were cryptic as those of Apollo at Delphi; how audiences perceived these consultations and recourse to Zeus Dodonaios; whether there was a difference in the choice of oracular centres; and whether Zeus' utterances diverged in their formulation from those of Apollo. Challenging the idea that Dodona was depicted in these texts simply as an exotic alternative to better-known Delphi, Piccinini argues that these references not only cast new light on playwrights' thoughts about the oracular shrine, but also allow us to assess the perceptions and expectations of the audience attending the performance.

Consideration of those perceptions and expectations leads on to Esther Eidinow's essay, 'Selves, Self-talk and Stories in the Dodona Oracle Question Tablets'. Focusing on the third-person formulation of many of the texts on the question tablets, and drawing on psychological and narratological research, Eidinow explores the mind-set of those who came to consult Zeus. She asks if these texts reveal a sense of the self as fragmented in the face of crisis, which may also suggest how processes of consultation at an oracle could have provided psychological relief to pilgrims. Using analytical approaches from cognitive linguistics, she explores the ways in which these texts may reveal a cognitive blending of Viewpoints – both mortal and divine – aiding self-integration and, thus, decision making. And, in the end, she argues, awe in the face of the divine may have been a key component of that experience, with significant impacts on the brain and body.

Experience of the divine is the focus of the final two essays, in which the contributors consider some different ways in which we might approach the idea of individual experience. In 'The Environmental Dimension of Consultations at Dodona: Negotiating Material Practice, Performing Resilience', Christopher Schliephake builds from his observation that many of the surviving tablets from ancient Dodona pose agriculturally related questions, to argue that oracles (and especially Dodona) functioned as sites where material practices of daily life could be negotiated with the gods in a ritual as well as communal context. Oracles, in other words,

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presented a way of communicating with the natural world. But, importantly, as well as negotiating with the divine, Dodona offered a space for individuals to reflect on the nature of their relationship with nonhuman forces, considering their potential resources and resilience for survival. They were places where the individual could present himself (or herself) in relation to this world: how he or she depended on its fruits for survival, but also how he (or she) could make or re-make the resources it had to offer so that it would flourish.

Taking seriously the ancients' experience of the divine is also a key focus of Michael Flower's argument. Indeed, in 'Consulting the Oracle at Dodona: An Ontological Perspective', Flower argues that it is an essential lens if we are better to understand the emic experience of oracular consultation, and one that goes far beyond simply trying to adopt the cultural filters of the ancient Greeks. Instead, using Latour's actor-network theory, Flower argues that oracular consultation drew on things, people and supernatural beings to create a human/non-human hybrid relational network. All of the participants of this network, human and non-human alike, exerted agency, which was not the sole product of human intentions, but rather the product of this particular network of relations.

Bringing together a multi-layered, more holistic perspective, the papers at the workshop and these resulting essays encompass both more traditional treatments of evidence and more recent approaches, as well as exploring questions that reflect back on the methodologies underpinning the scholarship itself. In this way, they can be said both to draw on and to help to develop the space/time conception of the sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona – and, perhaps, of the chronotope of 'the sanctuary', as suggested above. Our approach here is not un-Bakhtinian: when writing about the chronotope of the ancient Greek novel, Bakhtin suggested that, what he called, an 'alien world in adventure-time' was not created by finding new aspects but by drawing together elements from other genres, which in their compelling assembly can be seen to have 'assumed a new character and special functions'.[26] We hope that this volume, with its broad variety of perspectives and approaches, offers compelling interpretations that prompt not only perhaps new (and provocative) chronotopes, or instantiations, of the oracular site of Dodona, and of ancient sanctuaries and ancient divination, but also new questions arising from these chronotopes in these contexts of unknowing.

[26] Bakhtin 1981: 89.

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