

CHILDREN, LIFE COURSE AND FAMILIES ON THE LEAD TABLETS OF DODONA *

Résumé. — Ceci est la première étude qui exploite systématiquement le matériel survivant de l'oracle de Dodone pour reconstituer le parcours de vie d'individus. Elle combine une approche quantitative (avec une attention particulière au vocabulaire et à la terminologie) avec un choix raisonné d'inscriptions accompagnées d'une traduction et d'un commentaire afin de jeter une nouvelle lumière sur la riche diversité des préoccupations d'une population dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine.

Abstract. — This article for the first time systematically studies the surviving material from the oracle of Dodona for the subject of life course. It combines a quantitative approach – with special attention to vocabulary and terminology – with a careful selection of some telling and revealing instances of inscriptions that are translated and commented upon. In all, this study covers what is probably the best available random sample to imagine if not recreate the rich diversity of a population's concerns in Graeco-Roman Antiquity.

1. Introduction

Somewhere in the middle of the fourth century BC, a man called Epilytos, who probably travelled all the way from the South of Italy, consulted the oracle of Zeus Naios and Diona at Dodona in North West Greece. As an enquirer, he wrote down his questions and concerns in a simple and condensed style on a lead tablet – note the clumsy grammar and the switch of subjects:

God and good fortune. Epilytos asks Zeus Naios and Diona by doing what and by offering to whom of the gods he would succeed in life. Also whether

* I owe many thanks to Mark Golden (University of Winnipeg) for a first reading and language revision. Throughout this chapter, I use the editions by É. LHÔTE (2006) and S. DAKARIS, J. VOTOKOPOULOU and A. P. CHRISTIDIS (2013). (References to inscriptions included in these seminal works are signalled as follows: É. LHÔTE (2006), n. [#] and DVC [#], whereas I make clear use of the page number for other references). Readers can also consult the project Dodona Online [<https://dodonaonline.com/>], which is still very much a work under construction. This project surely cannot take away the necessity of going through a bibliography which is essentially in French or in Modern Greek (see A. RUBEL [2019]). As the interpretation of many readings of the tablets is often debatable or unsure, both LHÔTE and DVC need to be read together with J. MÉNDEZ DOSUNA (2008) and ID. (2016).

I should perform the trade in which I was educated, or start something different. Whether I shall shine in whatever he attempts to do [*sic*]. And whether I should take Phainomena as my wife, or another woman. And whether I should take a wife or remain as I am¹.

Tantalizingly little is known on how the priests dealt with Epilytos' enquiries. Did they formulate their answers orally after consultation? Did they pick up lots, a technique that was also used in the so-called "ticket oracles" of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt? Or was it rather the enquirers who chose "their own lot"? The fact that only a very small number of tablets with answers survives makes such questions all the more difficult to answer².

The observation, however, that over 4200 of such tablets from Dodona have survived and are now accessible via excellent and thorough editions should excite socio-cultural historians of Antiquity to a much higher degree than it has done so far. In fact, what we have at our disposal is a splendid and rich collection that offers almost direct access to sorrows and preoccupations of thousands of ordinary men and women over a period of about four centuries, from the mid of the sixth century to the middle of the second century BC (the site of Dodona was destroyed by the Romans in 167 BC). While most of the enquirers presumably came from the same region, at least some of them travelled a considerable distance to consult the oracle³. Above all, this is a collection of evidence that has not been "filtered" by any ancient author – the tablets have survived at random and were recovered during various campaigns of excavations.

The initial enthusiasm about such unique pieces of evidence requires some hedging though. Possibly half of the material from the Dodona tablets is still waiting for an edition⁴. Even after thorough editorial work, a consid-

1. DVC 2367: Θεὸς τύχα ἀγαθὰ. Ἐπίλυτος ἐπερωτῆι τὸν Δία τὸν Νάϊον / καὶ τὰν Διώναν τί κα ποιῶν εὐτυχοῖ καὶ τίνοι θεῶν θύσας / καὶ πότερα τὰν τέχνας ἡν ἐπαιδεύθην ἐργάζομαι ἢ ποτ' ἄλλο τι ἠομάσω καὶ ἢ λαμπῶμαι αἶ κ' ἐπιτηρῆι καὶ πότερα τὰν / Φαινομέναν γυναικα λάβω ἢ ἄλλαν καὶ πότερα καὶ διη / λάβω ἢ ποτιμένω.

2. An excellent and most readable introduction is provided by R. PARKER (2016), spec. p. 69-75, with quote on p. 69: "Beyond these generalities, however, almost everything is contestable" (on the way enquiries were dealt with). There are many introductions to the shrine and excavations at Dodona. J. PICCININI (2017) is a recent accessible introduction for both academics and a general audience.

3. V. ROSENBERGER (2003) mentions, apart from Taranto, mainly cities from the North of Epirus and from Corcyra as place of origin of visitor enquirers of Dodona (p. 35-36). Since É. LHÔTE (2006) and DVC, we now have testimonies of people from Thessaly, from Illyrian communities, and from Boeotia. See R. PARKER (2016), p. 75-77.

4. See É. LHÔTE (2006), p. 1-8, and R. PARKER (2016), p. 71-72, on the story of the edition (started in the 1980's, after excavations in 1875-1877, 1928-1932, 1935, and 1952-1959), and on the numbers: some 4000 tablets – most of the finds of the campaign of 1952-1959 – are still waiting to be edited.

erable part of the documents remains barely legible. The tablets were often folded, as the questions were supposed to be private and only to be read by the priests. These folds are often subject to corrosion, as is the lead itself, making many enquiries illegible. Tablets were reused; it comes as no surprise that the reading of such palimpsests is even harder. Among other factors contributing to the difficulties, one could list clumsy and/or careless handwriting, very condensed formulation that makes the question only understandable to the enquirer, wording that is unparalleled in other documentation, the use of dialects that are otherwise hardly known⁵. In preparing this article, I have carried out a “rough counting” of those lead tablets that do not contain any specific information about the enquiry: tablets that contain only a name, or those that contain only one letter or are totally illegible⁶. Even though such categories are inevitably somewhat arbitrary, the overall results are clear: 131 tablets contain only a name⁷, while 1049 have only one letter or are completely illegible. This means that 1180 out of 4200 inscriptions, or roughly at least 30 % of the total, consist of texts that are so fragmentary that nothing can be concluded on the content⁸. I estimate that a more radical counting, dismissing as illegible all the texts that do not seem to make any sense (again, lines are hard to draw), would add another ten to twenty percent of texts too fragmentary to secure any conclusions, leading to the sobering conclusion that about half of the material is of no use for the present study. Moreover, the dating of the inscriptions is almost exclusively done on palaeographical grounds, and is often most uncertain⁹. For those who lean too much on the interpretations and solutions of the editors, the danger of “writing history from square brackets” is never far away¹⁰. As I will show in this paper, S. DAKARIS, J. VOTOKOPOULOU and A. P. CHRISTIDIS (2013) in particular have more than once proposed “adventurous” readings

5. Cf. É. LHÔTE (2006), p. 8-11.

6. This is not to say that these tablets were devoid of any meaning in their original context. Lead tablets that only contain the name of the enquirer might have been related with an oral question, or with an enquiry not outspoken, for which the fact that the priest picked out this particular tablet could have been significant by itself. In the same way, the use of one single letter could have served as a token of recognition (*ἀναγνωριστικόν*) for the enquirer, who was perhaps illiterate.

7. According to J. PICCININI (2013), such tablets were souvenirs left by visitors, who wanted to have their oracle visit remembered.

8. In all, I have done a very conservative and cautious counting: only those inscriptions that are rendered in capitals by the DVC editors have been considered as illegible. This means that instance like DVC 175A (πε[ρι ---]); 216 (ἦ οὐ); 3244A ([---] καὶ [---]) or 3420B (περ [---]) have not been counted as illegible, neither those instances in which, apart from one word, the rest of the lines are indecipherable.

9. Cf. É. LHÔTE (2006), p. 15-21.

10. See J. BODEL (2001), p. 52-55, on the danger for epigraphists to write history from square brackets.

that are not supported by what is actually on the tablets. Lastly, there has not been any systematic study of other votive objects that should be studied together with the inscriptional evidence in order to get a fuller overview of what really moved and motivated enquirers to consult the oracle ¹¹.

Based on an extensive reading of the material from Dodona that is now available in editions, this article will tackle the subjects of children and childhood, life course and family in the collection. For this, I will combine a quantitative approach, with special attention given to vocabulary and terminology, while carefully selecting some telling and revealing instances of inscriptions which I will translate and comment upon. It is only by doing some basic counting that general patterns of concerns and questions can be revealed – therefore, it will also become clear for what reasons an inscription can be considered as “special” or out of the normal. In sum, this will be one of the first studies ever to cover what is probably the best available random sample to imagine if not recreate the rich diversity of a population’s concerns in Graeco-Roman Antiquity ¹².

2. Offspring and children

2.1. *A topic that matters*

As S. DAKARIS, J. VOTOKOPOULOU and A. P. CHRISTIDIS (2013) have noted themselves, the short question “regarding offspring” (περὶ γενεᾶς) is among the most frequent of the oracle enquiries ¹³. The conciseness of the question leaves open a vast domain of possibilities and scenarios that were known only to those who made the enquiry and are therefore forever beyond our reach of knowing. Are we dealing with enquirers who were concerned about having offspring, somewhere in the future? Or rather future fathers or mothers, worried by the actual perils of pregnancy? Was the actual offspring already alive, and subject of concerns? Were these more general concerns (“may my children have a good life”) or were they inspired by a current crisis situation? The best an epigraphist can do is sketch in what way the enquiries about offspring are formulated in the available source material.

11. See S. HOFFMANN (2019), p. 61-76, for a study of terracotta figurines in sanctuaries.

12. R. PARKER (2016), p. 72, mentions that the material from Dodona far exceeds in quantity what we find in Demotic, Greek, and Coptic oracle evidence. For what can be done for the study of socio-cultural history by the study of these other oracles, see E. EIDINOW (2007). Parker’s study already pays some attention to some life course issues (p. 77-86: “private enquiries”). See also J. PICCININI (2015).

13. See the extensive comment in DVC 5A and J. PICCININI (2015), p. 141 and 147. For γενεά with the meaning of “offspring”, see LSJ I 3.

There are 128 of instances “concerning offspring” in the Dodona lead tablets¹⁴. Charting the different situations leads to the following table:

Gender of the enquirer	Number of cases
Male	30
Female	10
Male + female (couple)	7
Uncertain	81

Table 1. Enquiries about offspring¹⁵

It is safe to assume that in the vast majority of the cases – those labelled as “uncertain” – the enquirers for offspring were men. In some cases, the question rather awkwardly asks whether the enquirer will have a child “from the wife he currently has”, at least leaving open the possibility of divorce in case the result would be that no children would come out of the marriage¹⁶. The graphic depiction of a phallus is another possible indication of a male wish for fertility¹⁷. Three tablets possibly refer to temporary sexual abstinence in order to evoke fertility afterwards¹⁸. On the other hand, women themselves appear as agents explicitly asking for offspring, in eight cases without the mention of a husband, or with the husband in a rather subordinate role¹⁹. Among these are two remarkable instances: Kleunika asks

14. Admittedly, this is only about 3 % for the total of approximately 4200 inscriptions, or 4-6 % of the inscriptions of which we can make sense. Cf. *supra*, note 8 on the difficulties involved in such counting. The 128 cases also contain instances in which the reconstruction of the formula $\pi\epsilon\rho\iota\ \gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ is somewhat doubtful. This number also includes the rare cases, seven in total, where $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\nu\upsilon\nu$ is used to denote offspring. See DVC II, p. 586 (s.v. $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\nu\upsilon\nu$).

15. J. PICCININI (2015), p. 141-147, distinguishes the same categories, but only offers some examples of each.

16. The word $\nu\upsilon\nu$ in connection with wife and possible offspring occurs in DVC 2493A; 3481 (doubtful reading) and 3554B.

17. Cf. É. LHÔTE (2006), n. 49, and *infra*, note 31. See V. DASEN (2015), p. 305-309, for other possible interpretations as protection against the Evil Eye. J. PICCININI (2015), p. 146, observes that, unlike other shrines, the oracle of Dodona “was not specialised in questions concerning fertility”.

18. See DVC 59B (fragmentary inscription and doubtful reading); 532A ($\acute{\epsilon}\ \mu\acute{\epsilon}$) and 534B ($\acute{\epsilon}\ \mu\acute{\epsilon}\ \theta\iota\gamma\delta$).

19. When the verb $\tau\epsilon\kappa\nu\upsilon\nu$ (“to bear children”) is used to express the longing for offspring, women were obviously the enquirers. See DVC 885A (Selenis); 2552A (Kleunika); 2609A (Plaurata); 4164B (unnamed woman, $\epsilon\iota\ \tau\acute{\epsilon}\xi\omega$). Other tables with women asking for offspring include DVC 342B; 347A; 1318A ($\acute{\epsilon}\xi\ \acute{\alpha}\nu\delta\rho\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$); 1909B; 3289A; 4115A.

Zeus Naios and Diona whether she could have offspring “from another husband” (ἐξ ἄλλω [ἀ]νδρός), while Plaurata informs whether she should “have intercourse” (ἐντυγγάνουσα) with Plator, son of Karpon, in order to secure male children for herself²⁰. The presence of female consultants and the particular case of questions by women about offspring is a striking occurrence in the evidence from Dodona, which confronts us with the *ipsissima verba* of women concerned to maintain their position in the οἶκος and the family – a position that could only be maintained by generating children²¹.

The total of 128 is a rather cautious and conservative count though. Since παῖς can refer to both a slave and a child, the enquiries containing this word were not included. However, 36 of these instances do not exclude the possibility of parents asking a question about their offspring²². Two other tablets mention a παιδίον, clearly a young child for whom the parents wished a long and happy life²³.

In the case of tablets related to εὐτοκία we are reminded of the perils of giving birth: a tablet imploring help from Artemis (DVC 541B)²⁴, a request to Demeter (DVC 585A), and a rather uncertain reading of the word εὐτοκία (DVC 2270B). One lead tablet shows the drawing of a womb, in the form of an upturned jug, which has a key poised at the mouth. Such a sketch could point to a variety of obstetrical problems. Should the womb be “locked” to preserve the baby, or rather “unlocked” to allow sperm to go in or the child to come out safely²⁵?

20. See DVC 2552A (Kleunika). Also 2555B mentions “another husband” in connection with the name Kleunika: the tablet possibly was a summary of the more extended request of 2552A. DVC 2609A (Plaurata) on ἐντυγγάνειν as “a proper but no nonsense word for intercourse”, as defined in S. DEACY and K. F. PIERCE (1997), p. 56. The word appears three times in the tablets of Dodona, but only once with a female subject. For men using the verb ἐντυγγάνειν in connection with women, see DVC 2229A and 2231B. See É. LHÔTE (2006), n. 44, where the participle χρωμένη is used with the same meaning, in the case of a woman asking for offspring (É. Lhôte refers to Herodotus, *Hist.*, 2, 181, for a similar use of this term).

21. Both J. PICCININI (2015), p. 148-149, and R. PARKER (2016), p. 79-80, refer to the unique evidence of female consultants at Dodona.

22. From the list in DVC II, p. 566-567 (*s.v.* παῖς), only 22A and 76 unambiguously refer to παῖδες as slaves.

23. See DVC 251A: καὶ τὸ παιδίον / μοι ἀφιζεται / ἰς ἦβας τέλος; DVC 2187B: Νικόδορος ἐ[περῶται ---] / τὸ παιδίον [---].

24. See the rich commentary in DVC on Artemis and pregnancy – note that in this inscription, the word εὐτοκία is not used, and childbirth is suspected because of the mention of the name Ἀράμυτι.

25. See DVC 486B, referring *inter alia* to S. I. JOHNSTON (1991), p. 186. More evidence on “the key to the womb”, also on amulets and in medical/magical texts, is collected by V. DASEN (2015), p. 68-72.

2.2. *Some specific concerns*

Given the demographic regime, the question “will the child survive?” would be an obvious one²⁶. About ten tablets possibly point to this wish in the case of newborns²⁷. A father asks whether it would be good for his son to send him to Arybbas, possibly a doctor²⁸. At least one tablet explicitly testifies to the loss of a former child²⁹, while such instances of loss may well have been the experience of many of the enquirers hoping for future surviving offspring.

Another particular male concern turns up in questions about legitimate fatherhood. “Does the child belong to Alexander, son of Neoptolemos?”³⁰. “Lysanias asks Zeus Naios and Dione whether the child Annyla bears is not his” is another explicit instance³¹. Tablet 623B mentions a young woman, not married yet ([τ]ἄν παρθένο[ν ---]), her father (πατέρα) and illegitimacy ([μῆ] νομίμ[ως ---]). It takes a sort of leap of faith to believe, with the editors, that this query relates to a discussion about legitimate fatherhood. The clearest instance is the following question:

[ἔ Ἄμ]φινόῃ τέκνο(ν) ἐστὶ (τὸ) Τάτα (βέ)βλ(ε)κε (?) I[- - -];

Whether the child that Tata is carrying/is having (?) is from [Am]phinoos³².

As the DVC editors rightfully remark, this might be an instance of a slave owner asking the question about his female slave Tata, who was pregnant.

It should come as no surprise that male offspring was particularly wished for. Eighteen tablets contain an explicit wish for male children³³.

26. About 30 % of the infants would die before reaching their first birthday. See C. LAES (2011a), p. 23-27.

27. See DVC 145A (but more on youth); 1459B (on γενεᾶς); 2493A (explicit); + seven cases of παραμόνιμος in index.

28. See É. LHÔTE (2006), n. 50: περι ὑ{Π}ὸς {ὕδς} ὑγι[είας] {Π} ἧ ὠνέωμ[α]τ[ι]; οὔτος δὲ εἰ μὴ πέμπω ποτ’ Ἀρύββαν, ἀλλ’ αὐτεῖ μένη[ι];

29. See DVC 401B (παῖδα ἄλλον – suggesting the loss of a former son).

30. DVC 41A: ἡ Ἀλεξάνδρου τοῦ Νεοπτολέμου υἱοῦ.

31. É. LHÔTE [2006], n. 49: ἐρωτῆ Λυσα/νίας Δία Ναῖον / καὶ Δηώνα<ν> ἧ οὐκ ἐστὶ ἐξ αὐτοῦ / τὸ παιδάριον / ὃ Ἀννύλα κτεῖ. Cf. already *supra*, note 17, on this inscription, with depiction of a phallus.

32. DVC 3550B: Additional commentary and new reading by J.-M. CARBON and É. LHÔTE (4/4/2019) on Dodona Online. An alternative reading could be ἄμβλδκε (the Doric variant of ἡμβλωκε, perf. of ἄμβλίσκω “cause to miscarry”). I owe this suggestion to Herman Seldeslachts (UCLouvain & Université de Namur).

33. See the list in DVC 313A: 150A; 342B; 401B; 542A; 833A; 1594B; 1776A; 1895A; 1979A; 2441A; 3130A; 3297A; 3302B; 3335B; 3344A; 3554B; 4161B. The rich commentary refers to literary passages such as Euripides, *Bacch.*, 1305 (ὄστις ἄτεκνος ἀρσένων παίδων γεγώς), and Demosthenes, *Or.*, 43, 12 (μάλιστα μὲν ἠῦχετο τοῖς θεοῖς υἱὸν αὐτῶ γενέσθαι).

The opposite case, the explicit desire for a daughter to be born, would be an exceptional occurrence. S. DAKARIS, J. VOTOKOPOULOU and A. P. CHRISTIDIS (2013) seem to discern four instances, but on closer inspection, all are doubtful. “Will I never get a girl?” might as well be read as a request by a bachelor³⁴. Tablet 373A is a doubtful reading, while tablet 429B rather seems to be about the marriage of a girl³⁵. The last example, 1538B, could be read as a question about a brother getting a girl out of his marriage, though it could relate to the health of a brother’s daughter as well³⁶.

Children should also be “useful”. This is the explicit message of one of the oldest lead tablets, written in *boustrophedon* between 525 and 500 BC.

Hermon – to which of the gods should he pray to get offspring from Kretaia that will be useful, in addition to the one he already has^{37?}

The term *ὀνάσιμος* does not make clear what sort of “usefulness” is meant, but it leaves open possibilities such as good health (and consequently no sickness or impairing conditions), the capability of performing physical labour, or taking care of the parents in later life (the idea of *γηροτροφία*)³⁸.

With the verb *ἤβαν*, seven inscriptions explicitly point to the stage of attaining puberty³⁹.

Praying and offering to whom of the gods will he mature fruitfully^{40?}

Unfortunately, not a single one of these tablets offers enough information about the gender of either the enquirers or their offspring. Reaching biological adulthood was an important phase in the life course, which meant that an individual had survived the perils of infancy and childhood. Throughout the Greek and Roman world, this was celebrated with ceremonies of *rites de passage*, mostly in the case of boys⁴¹. It also meant that other important stages of life came closer: marriage and having children.

34. See DVC 38A: αἶτε οὐδε/μία κόρα μοι / γίνυται(ι).

35. See DVC 373A: [--- πέρ] τᾶς / [---] γενεᾶς / [---]Ε θῆλυ; DVC 429B: [--- λῶϊο]ν καὶ ἄμει[ν]ον [---] / [--- περι θυγ]ατρὸς τῷ Διονυσίῳ [---] / [---] καὶ περὶ τᾶς γυναι[κ]ός [---] / [--- πο]τθεμένα γ[ν]ναῖκα [---].

36. See also the very fragmentary DVC 909B, where the words *κόρα* and *ἐμοί* are discernible on lines 3 and 4. Again no certainty can be reached about the meaning.

37. É. LHÔTE (2006), n. 41: *Ἡέρμων τίνα / κα θεὸν ποτθέμ/ενος γενεά ρ/οι γένοιτο ἐκ Κ/ρεταίας ὀνά/σιμος πὸτ τᾶι ἐ/άσαι;*

38. The term *ὀνασις* relating to offspring occurs in DVC 313A; 2768B; 3297A. See also DVC 145A for a similar idea. See É. LHÔTE (2006), n. 52, l. 2-3 for an explicit mention of the *γηροτροφία*: καὶ παῖδες ἔσσονται / [γη]ροτρόφοι Ἰσοδήμοι.

39. See DVC 145 A, 251A, 344A, 780A, 1455A, 3798, 3928. Other tablets that refer to “living further on”, without explicit use of the term *ἤβαν* or reference to youth, include 413B, 414A, 1391A, 1459B, 2493A, 2768B, 3297A, 3828A, 3982B.

40. DVC 145A: [τίνα κα θεὸν εὐχόμενος] καὶ θύδων ἠ(ε)βδοί / [---] εὐκαρπιᾶδων.

Therefore, the death of young adults was often considered as a particularly dramatic instance, with youthful ages at death being well represented in funerary commemoration⁴². The seven lead tablets from Dodona clearly point to (in all likelihood) the parents' wish for their child to once reach that important stage, or maybe to young people already close to the moment of their initiation rite, with their parents asking the god for a further safe future⁴³.

3. Families and Households

There has been an ongoing debate between historians of families in the ancient world about the exact relationship between household composition and commemoration. When one studies patterns of commemoration on inscriptions, the nuclear family unit (father, mother and children) comes up time and again as the main focus of emotional attention. However, studies on habitation and co-residence have demonstrated that ancient households were much more fluid units: extended or multiple families lived together, next to other household forms such as non-family households, individuals living with slaves or servants, and simple or nuclear family units. Household composition often changed according to the variations and stages of the human life cycle⁴⁴. Meanwhile, an important article by Sabine Huebner has settled the debate. Comparing the census evidence from Graeco-Roman Egypt with the epigraphical documentation of the same territory has made clear that these two approaches are not in direct opposition to each other. While Egyptians indeed showed a preference for commemorating nuclear family bonds on gravestones, thereby making these family members the focus of emotional attention, they at the same time lived together in households that were often quite dissimilar from our present-day core family units⁴⁵.

In the next table, I will make clear how the evidence from Dodona can contribute to the debate. Potentially, we could meet enquirers asking questions on behalf of their families in the broad sense of the word, of the group

41. Cf. C. LAES and J. STRUBBE (2014), p. 49-60, offering evidence from both the Greek East and the Latin West.

42. L. REVELL (2005) has aptly summarised this topic. Admittedly, most of the inscriptional evidence on ages is Latin, since the Greek epigraphical habit was less inclined to mention chronological age.

43. See in particular the commentary at DVC 145A, with reference to R. GARLAND (1990).

44. Very similar images emerge from the study of the Greek and the Roman world. See K. BRADLEY (1991); M. GOLDEN (2015²); W. SCHMITZ (2007) – to name just a few important surveys.

45. Cf. S. HUEBNER (2011).

of people with whom they co-habited, or simply of those who were in their close emotional proximity. Also, the evidence might reveal something about family life in the region of Dodona, which was always considered as a remote inland area, at the fringe of the Greek world, with little urban agglomeration, having more emphasis on custom than on law, and no clearly developed civic life⁴⁶.

Pattern of relationship of the person for whom the request is done	Number of lead tablets	Inscriptions
Children	164	Cf. <i>supra</i> , p. 186
Marriage (“will I get married?”)	121	DVC 1
Wife	30	DVC II, p. 573 (<i>s.v.</i> περι γυναϊκός)
Daughter	28	DVC 38A and 429
Siblings	22	DVC 96B
Slaves	18	DVC 170A (runaway slaves); II, p. 496 (<i>s.v.</i> ἀνδράποδον); II, p. 508 (<i>s.v.</i> δοῦλος); II, p. 531 (<i>s.v.</i> (Ἔ)οικέτας)
Mother	12	DVC II, p. 557 (<i>s.v.</i> μάτηρ)
Father	5	DVC II, p. 569 (<i>s.v.</i> πατήρ)
Spouse	4	DVC II, p. 496 (<i>s.v.</i> ἀνήρ); p. 584 (<i>s.v.</i> σύμβιος)
Son	2	DVC II, p. 594 (<i>s.v.</i> υἱός)

Table 2: Patterns of family relationships⁴⁷

At first sight, the table points overwhelmingly to the significance of the core family unit consisting of husband, wife, and children. The only excep-

46. On family structures in Epirus and surroundings, see J. K. DAVIES (2000) and P. CABANES (2010).

47. Also for this list, we have to acknowledge that the context of the request often remains unclear. When a son prefers to mention the name of his mother, rather than his father’s name, would this point to a request on behalf of his mother (DVC 693A: Εὐδοκίας υἱός)? And does the use of the patronym point to a request in favour of the father (DVC 984A: Λυκότα υἱός)?

tion seem to be the slaves, about whom concerns mainly arose when they ran away⁴⁸. Apparently, they were regarded as cases of lost property. Other family relations are strikingly absent. There are no grandparents or grandchildren, no aunts or uncles, no nephews or nieces mentioned in the collection of Dodona tablets. Even household personnel such as wet-nurses, nannies or pedagogues/childcarers do not occur in the evidence. The strong emphasis on daughters is explained by parental concerns about getting their girls married, while sons are surely not absent. Parents were indeed repeatedly concerned about the procreation of male offspring (cf. *supra*, note 33). The nuclear family unit is even numerically more prevalent, if one counts the fourteen instances in which a son asks whether it would be profitable to him to continue “the father’s trade” (πατρῴα τέχνα, DVC II, p. 569).

The evidence unambiguously shows how marriage and children were a crucial focus of emotional concerns to the visitors of the shrine of Dodona. There seems to be no trace of “other” family structures, as they appear in other epigraphical evidence from North-West Greece. Yet stating that the nuclear family unit was the sole focus of attention as far as family matters were concerned, would be stretching the evidence too far. No fewer than 67 tablets record a request “about my whole environment” (περὶ παμπασίας). The term παμπασία almost exclusively belongs to the Dodona region, and it might very well be the case that the enquirer had his wider family network or other household members in mind, while formulating his request⁴⁹. The

48. A particular case in DVC 1422A, which seems to suggest the desire for revenge on the female slave of the person who killed a slave of the enquirer: ἔ τοῦ παιδο[λ]έτου παι(δὸ)ς μὸλῃ/τὰν ἔχῶν τύχοιμι. See the commentary for the word παιδολέτωρ in Aeschylus, *Septem contra Thebas*, 726 and the flawed syntax of the lead tablet text, which should probably read παῖδα instead of παῖς. Recently, É. LHÔTE put forward the following interpretation: “*Est-ce que je peux me trouver dans le cas d’avoir un accusateur de l’infanticide (que je suis) ?*”. He takes together DVC 1424B, 1423A, 1422A, and 1425B. His reconstruction of a possibly intriguing story is worth citing in full: *On peut imaginer le scénario suivant : un maître a eu un enfant illégitime avec une esclave, et ils l’ont fait disparaître, non par exposition, comme c’était la coutume la plus répandue, mais en le tuant, volontairement ou non. Ils sont venus visiter ensemble l’oracle, et c’est d’abord l’esclave qui a consulté : la meilleure solution consiste évidemment à affranchir immédiatement l’esclave, sans clause de παραμονή, et à la laisser partir bien loin, de manière à éviter des poursuites judiciaires. Cependant, la malheureuse ne désire pas quitter son maître, d’où sa question. Il faut savoir qu’en cas d’accusation, l’esclave sera la première interrogée, et peut-être torturée.* (Dodona online, 6/2/2019.) See also R. PARKER (2016), p. 84-85, on the Dodona evidence documenting slaves running away.

49. See DVC 25A; II, p. 567 (s.v. παμπασία), and LSJ, where the term παμπασία is only mentioned in the Supplement (p. 113), with reference to Dodona and Epirus.

same concern may be behind the circa twenty requests “about the house” (περὶ (φ)οικίας), a term that possibly entailed more than just the building⁵⁰.

4. Tales of families – some case stories

Even though it has been demonstrated that ancient Epirus had specific patterns of family networks (in which major institutions such as the γένος and φυλή played a more significant role) (cf. *supra*, note 46), the pattern that emerges from the Dodona inscriptions rather confirms well-known facts of ancient Greek family life. Marriage was essentially virilocal⁵¹. Hence, marrying one’s daughter off essentially meant bringing her to the house of another man⁵²:

Theon asks Zeus Naios and Diona whether it will be better and more desirable for his daughter Thaleia to live with a man. And whether she will have offspring⁵³.

The place of dwelling turns up on some other lead tablets. A first instance possibly refers to a sort of suspicion for brother and sister/sister-in-law living together.

And whether I myself and my wife should live together with her, who is my/her (?) sister⁵⁴.

Another possible interpretation might be “and whether I should live with one who is my sister, myself and my wife”, in which the second line possibly belongs to a different question. In this case, the enquiry might have been about marriage and having sex with siblings or half-siblings⁵⁵.

When a brother was left with his sister when their parents had died, it was up to him to take care of marrying off his sister before he could think about marriage himself:

50. See DVC II, p. 531 and 562.

51. Cf. W. SCHMITZ (2007), p. 27-30 and 59-62.

52. Cf. R. PARKER (2016), p. 78-79, on the importance of marriage in the Dodona inscriptions.

53. DVC 2508A: ἐπερωτῆ Θεόν τὸν Δία τὸν Νάϊον καὶ / Διώναν πότερα οἰκῆσαι Θαλείαι τῆι θυγατρὶ ποτ’ ἀνδρα / λῳίον καὶ ἄμεινον ἐσσεῖται καὶ γενεὰ / αὐτῆι ἐσσεῖται.

54. DVC 1193A: καὶ πότερα κάσι / ἐάσσαι συνφοικέω / αὐτὸς χά γυνά. The commentary refers to e.g. Plato, *Pol.*, 461e: [...] ἀδελφάς τε καὶ ἀδελφούς, ὥστε, ὁ νυνδὴ ἐλέγομεν, ἀλλήλων μὴ ἄπτεσθαι. See, however, É. LHÔTE (2006), n. 56, where a man asks whether it would be better to move in with his brother.

55. Cf. R. PARKER (2016), p. 80, who also states that “[t]his would be a rare case of the oracle being enlisted as a moral arbiter”.

God and good fortune! Whether all will be well after he has taken care of his sister Aristokleia⁵⁶.

The central position of the dwelling also speaks from this inscription, which reveals sorrows in the case of small children moving out:

Whether Eurynos' small children will do better leaving their house⁵⁷.

A particular instance of physically moving out a family are cases in which a man was the father of the children of a slave woman who belonged to another master. In such cases, the father had to buy his partner and her children, after which he could take the opportunity of freeing his new family.

About Korydalla and Korydalla's children, whether I will succeed in buying them, as I am the father⁵⁸.

Health obviously was an important issue on the lead tablet requests, as is testified by the numerous questions concerning health (*περὶ ὑγιείας*) and welfare (*περὶ σωτηρίας*)⁵⁹. Quite unsurprisingly, eye diseases were the main concern. The following two inscriptions closely link disease with family matters:

God and good fortune. Agilaidas and his relatives ask about the illness of the eyes that had affected their ancestors. Sacrificing to whom of the gods might there be a remedy for the others and good health⁶⁰?

Apart from the peculiar vocabulary⁶¹, this text is quite unique in showing a family that for generations had known eye problems. Should we think of a congenital condition, or a blemish that affected a whole clan? Or were the eye problems of a more common occurrence, as for instance infections or sight diminishing with old age? In the latter case, it is hard to understand

56. DVC 1051A: [θεὸς τύ]χα ἀγαθ(ά). Ἀριστοκ/[λει]ας ἀδελφεῶς μερ/[μινά]σας τυχάνοι(τ)ο. The commentary refers to e.g. Demosthenes, *Or.*, 40, 19: [...] ἢ τε μήτηρ μου τάλαντον ἐπενεγκαμένη προῖκα, ἐκδοθεῖσα ὑπὸ τῶν ἀδελφῶν τῶν αὐτῆς, ὥσπερ οἱ νόμοι κελεύουσιν, συνήκησεν τῷ πατρὶ.

57. DVC 354; É. LHÔTE (2006), n. 55. The commentary suggests the possibility of migration, but it could as well refer to taking possession of another house.

58. DVC 22A: περὶ Κορυ(δ)άλλας καὶ τῶν Κορυδάλλα/ς παίδων πότερά κα τυχάνοιμι / πεπαμένος [κ]αθάπερ πατήρ. See also DVC 2383A for a similar case, and É. LHÔTE (2006), n. 54, about moving out to the countryside.

59. R. PARKER (2016), p. 83-84, calls health "a routine subject of enquiry". The indices in DVC reveal 53 instances of *περὶ ὑγιείας* and 49 cases of *περὶ σωτηρίας*.

60. DVC 556A: Θεὸς τύχα ἀγαθά. ἐρωτᾷ Ἀ/γλαΐδας καὶ οἱ συγγενέες / πέρ τοῦ ἄρρωστῆματος τ/ῶν ὀφθαλμῶν τῶν οἱ π/ατέρες ἄρρωστήσασεν / αἱ ἔστι κίννη κε θεῶν / δρᾶντες τοῖς λοιποῖς / στάμα γενηθεῖε / καὶ ὑγίεια.

61. For the word ἄρρωσθημα, see LSJ, *s.v.*, and the commentary in DVC – more than νόσος it refers to a particular disease.

why Agilaidas and his relatives would link the disease directly to their ancestors⁶².

A rather unique instance is a lead tablet that possibly refers to a boy with speech impairment, or even to the case of a mute child:

About the boy. Will he produce sounds⁶³?

If the reading is correct (and again, the DVC editors seem rather keen to accept such “adventurous” readings), this inscription should be added to the not very long list of the healing of either a speech impairment or a condition of muteness. As often, the ancient vocabulary does not allow for accurate retrospective diagnosis⁶⁴.

5. Conclusion

This contribution set out to introduce and study a unique body of evidence, the importance of which can hardly be overstated. The difficult access, however, to a two-volume edition entirely written in Modern Greek, may be responsible for the fact that this gold mine has not been exploited to its full extent by the global community of scholars. Next to family historians and historians of the human life course, linguists, specialists of ancient religion, economy and social history, with subjects as migration, illness or slavery, come to the mind⁶⁵.

In no way can a study like this, based on a careful reading of the epigraphic texts, pretend to be comprehensive. Studies on ancient sanctuaries have by now moved on, not only paying close attention to objects of cult and votive statuettes⁶⁶, but also to subjects such as the archaeology of space and senses⁶⁷. For the sanctuary of Dodona, all these aspects have been badly understudied, and it is to be hoped that more sophisticated studies will approach the evidence in its entirety, thereby asking how enquirers – men and women, maybe accompanied by children, people in good health and the sick – must have felt when they walked around in Dodona, and how they

62. R. PARKER (2016), p. 86, points out that attempts to link diseases with past offences are very rare in the Dodona tablets: “The dominant ethos was to seek a cure and not to admit fault.”

63. DVC 3027B: [περι] παιδός [αι κ]ατα(φθε)γ)ζεῖ.

64. C. LAES (2011b) and ID. (2013), provide such lists of instances. For inscriptional evidence of healing at a sanctuary, see ID. (2011b), p. 466 (two cases from Epidaurus) and ID. (2013), p. 170-171 (Battus and the oracle of Delphi).

65. Some of these themes have been touched upon by R. PARKER (2016), p. 81-82 (mobility, migration and travel); p. 82 (farming); p. 82 (social level of the consultants); p. 82-83 (lending of money). É. LHÔTE (2006) pays considerable attention to linguistic matters, as does J. Méndez Dosuna in his publications.

66. S. HOFFMANN (2019) is a good example of such new approaches.

67. Cf. E. J. GRAHAM (2017); J. HUGHES (2017).

gave utterance to their sorrows and concerns in other ways than just by the written record.

Meanwhile, this article has drawn a rather conventional image of ancient Greek thoughts and practices of personal life. This should not come as a surprise. After all, the concerns uttered at Dodona in some way or another belonged to the public sphere. One should not expect enquirers to express intimate feelings or unconventional thoughts before an audience of priests and presumably surrounded by many bystanders and potential buyers. “Get married, have a house with your wife, take care of your children, and look for a comfortable life for yourself and your family” seems to be the popular wisdom with which most of the Dodona consultants would agree. This wasn’t necessarily a world of fixed stability. Some asked about the possibility of moving out or migration, and it was questioned whether continuing “the trade of the father” was the best way to get on with life. It surely was a world of fragility, where the physical health and wellbeing of the members of the close family unit was a matter of constant concern. Early infancy, puberty, and pregnancy were seen as particular perils. In the world of ancient Epirus, slaves were all around⁶⁸. People considered buying them (“will it be a good deal?”). The possibility of freeing slaves, and even raising a family with another one’s slave, was not regarded as an impossible option.

Popular wisdom also entails a practical, no nonsense approach to facts of life. Men considered marrying another wife in case the first marriage turned out to be childless; another child could compensate for the loss of a former one; every now and then women asked about the possibility of having another husband; “having intercourse with” is mentioned several times without any prudery. Strikingly little is said on “other people”. This was a society in which one was happy to take care of those in close proximity, and to generally keep a low profile: a quietistically resigned attitude to life, in which one ought to respect the limits. Yet this did not prevent people from searching for new opportunities in life.

In all, the large bulk of the requests on tablets is traditional and conservative – testifying to “the anxiety of continuity”, as Keith Bradley has aptly named it. The sort of questions that are asked belong to a *longue durée* of centuries of the ancient Mediterranean, at least from Greek Antiquity up to the late ancient world. As such, they add to the evidence of

68. Slavery in the Dodona tablets has been the subject of a separate study by E. EIDINOW (2011), p. 244-271.

dream-books, fables, or proverbs – all fascinating sources that somehow bring us closer to the voices of those too little heard in Antiquity⁶⁹.

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69. For the analysis of dream-books, fables and proverbs as regards life course and family life, see K. BRADLEY (2001); A. J. POMEROY (1991); C. LAES (2006); K. BRADLEY (2019), p. 65-89.

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