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RETHINKING EPIROTE RELIGION.

A SURVEY OF RECENT SCHOLARSHIP ON EPIROTE CULTS AND SANCTUARIES

Any study of regional Greek cults, with the exception of Athens, suffers inevitably from the lack of sources. The difficulty in reaching a comprehensive understanding of local religion is confirmed by the near absence of exhaustive modern scholarship (SOURVINOU INWOOD 1986, 235 and OSANNA 1996, 18; PARKER 2005, 1). A cursory survey shows indeed that, apart from a few examples on the religious history of Crete, Boeotia, Thessaly, Arcadia, Achaëa and Cyclades¹, the investigation of local religious systems in ancient Greece has been a long neglected subject². The Atheno-centrism of Greek literary sources sets an enormous basin where to catch information for the religion of Athens and Attica³, but little remains for other areas, especially those lying at the fringes of the ancient Greek world. Likewise, the lack of archaeological and epigraphic evidence, which would help in understanding better the religious life of specific areas outside Attica, depends on the fact that systematic and extensive excavations have been not always carried out in all the regions.

In this respect, the study of Epirote religion falls into line with other understudied areas (QUANTIN 1999, *passim*); the liminality of the region – to be meant both geographically, as a territory at the fringes of the Greek world, and scholarly, as an unusual scenario used by ancient sources to set cults and religious practices⁴ – has contributed to underplay the study of cults in Epirus as a whole. In addition, archaeological excavations and surveys rarely explore sub-

regions of Epirus (Thesprotia, Molossia and Chaonia)⁵. These have affected the full comprehension of ancient Epirote religion.

Studies published to date on religious life in Epirus have to different extents been coloured by, or fully reliant on, two main approaches:

- 1) The examination of a single shrine or, less frequently, a group of sanctuaries;
- 2) Inquiries on a specific deity and the spread of his/her cult.

As for the first trend of study, only three major shrines have been object of investigation: the oracular sanctuary of Dodona, the *Asklepieion* at Butrint and the *Nekromanteion* of the Acheront⁶. Among these, special attention was devoted to the oracle of Dodona, mainly because of its peculiarities and exoticness⁷. The presence of the shrine of Dodona within the territory, however, instead of challenging the investigation, has restricted paradoxically the spectrum of research. The oracular sanctuary has worked as the main, if not the sole, pivot for any scholar approaching the topic of Epirote religion in the past fifty years or so⁸. Recent publications have focused on Dodona archaeological remains (DIETERLE 2007; QUANTIN 2008) and its oracular tablets, which have been studied from linguistic and anthropological standpoints (LHÔTE 2006; EIDINOW 2007). However, a broad-ranging work, which will encompass all the available sources, is still lacking.

The *Asklepieion* at Butrint is the second best

¹ See for Crete, PRENT 2005; for Boeotia SCHACHTER 1981-1994; for Thessaly, MILI 2005; GRANINGER 2011; for Arcadia JOST 1986; for Achaëa OSANNA 1996; for the Cyclades SAVO 2004.

² A point, and an urgency, stressed during the 2012 conference on ‘Sanctuaries and Cult in ancient Thessaly’ organized by the British School in Athens and Lincoln College of Oxford (http://www.bsa.ac.uk/pages/event_drill.php?events_id=729&cat_id=50).

³ With no claim to supply a complete bibliography, see namely PARKE 1977; PARKER 1997; SOURVINOU INWOOD 2003; PARKER 2005; SOURVINOU INWOOD 2011.

⁴ Even in the case of the shrine of Dodona, which is often mentioned by ancient sources, no literary evidence describes its religious practice.

⁵ Exceptionally in this sense the surveys in Thesprotia carried out by the Finnish Institute at Athens, see FORSÉN 2009 and FORSÉN - TIKKALA 2011.

⁶ For the sake of completeness it is opportune to record those contributions on religious influences, cults and temples of specific sites and more generally on Epirus and nowadays Albania. However, their shortness and approximation compromise their value and hinders from having an overall and complete view of the issue: CEKA 1992; ANAMALI 1992.

⁷ See, for instance, the methods of divination and the odd practices of the priests, the Selloi “sleeping on the ground with unwashed feet” (HOM. *Il.* XVI, 267-268).

⁸ After PARKE 1967, the shrine has been object of recent investigations, LHÔTE 2006; MOUSTAKIS 2006, 16-157; DIETERLE 2007; EIDINOW 2007; QUANTIN 2008.

known shrine. Since the first decades of the 19th century extensive archaeological excavations have been done both in the sacred area and in the acropolis (MUSTILLI 1941; UGOLINI 1942). In recent years, the site and its management are held by the Butrint Foundation in collaboration with the Albanian archaeological authorities (BOWDEN - HODGES - LAKO 1998). Along with the study of the earliest phases and of the strong connections between Butrint and Corcyra, the Hellenistic and Roman history of the sanctuary and its topography have been largely investigated (ARAFAT - MORGAN 1995; MELFI 2007; MOUSTAKIS 2006, 172-178; HANSEN 2009; MELFI 2012). A major contribution is also the work by Cabanes and Drini, in collaboration with Hatzopoulos, who collected accurately the numerous epigraphic evidence – mainly manumission decrees – found in the site (CABANES - DRINI 2007; see also MORRICONE 1986). Such works not only are helpful in reconstructing the functions and development of the shrine, but also are important to understand the socio-political and economic life in the region.

Not the same rigorousness has been applied to the study of the *Nekromanteion* of the Acheront, mentioned by Homer and Herodotus (HOM. *Od.* X, 513-520; HDT. V, 92, η), but whose precise location near Ephyra in Thesprotia is still unknown (DAKARIS 1993 *contra* BAATZ 1999; OGDEN 2004, 17-28, part. 19-21, 43-60; MOUSTAKIS 2006, 158-163). In the late 1950s the archaeologist S. Dakaris, on the base of the geographical location and similarities to the descriptions found in Herodotus and Homer, believed to have found the *Nekromanteion* (DAKARIS 1993). Recently, Dakaris' hypothesis has been confuted by Baatz, who proposed to read the remains of the supposed *Nekromanteion* as the ruins of a Hellenistic fortified farmhouse, according to a type quite common in the area (BAATZ 1999).

More wide-ranging is the recent book by Moustakis (PICCININI 2009), who chose not a single sanctuary, but a group of Epirote shrines, which functioned as political centres: Dodona, the *Nekromanteion* of the Acheront, the sanctuary of Zeus at Passaron, the sanctuary of Athena

Poliás in Chaonia, the *Asklepieion* at Butrint, the *Nymphaion* at Apollonia and the sanctuary of Apollo Aktios at Nikopolis⁹. Moustakis' aim was to understand the area of interest of these sanctuaries, their political influence inside and outside Epirus through the analysis of the literary and epigraphic sources. The profit of including the archaeological evidence in the study is underplayed and limited to certain categories of findings, such as structures and inscribed stones and bronzes. Even from a cursory survey it is evident the disproportions between the different parts of the work, as a third of the book focuses on the shrine of Dodona. The abundance of evidence for the oracle of Zeus Naios and the very restricted local dimension of some other sanctuaries, such as the sanctuary of Athena *Poliás* in Chaonia and the *Nymphaion* of Apollonia, might give grounds for this lack of proportion, however, not the same arguments might be adduced for the *Asklepieion* at Butrint, whose richness of epigraphic material is outstanding and enough to understand the political significance and development of the shrine at the very least in the Hellenistic and Roman period (CABANES - DRINI 2007)¹⁰. With the limits highlighted, the book remains a fundamental tool for anyone approaching the study of the political and religion history of Epirus.

The second trend, followed by modern scholarship in the study of Epirote religion, focuses on the exam of specific divine figures and the diffusion of their worship in the region (TZOUVARA SOULI 1979; TZOUVARA SOULI 1992; TZOUVARA SOULI 1993). In this field, Tzouvara Souli, whose last book will be discussed shortly, might be acknowledged as the undisputed master. Since the late 70s she has produced a few articles and monographs mainly on the cult of female deities (TZOUVARA SOULI 1979), of Apollo (TZOUVARA SOULI 1984; TZOUVARA SOULI 2001), of Poseidon (TZOUVARA SOULI 1999), of Herakles (TZOUVARA SOULI 2000), and, ultimately, of Zeus (TZOUVARA SOULI 2004; TZOUVARA SOULI 2008), all presenting the same structure: a list of literary, archaeological and epigraphic evidence testifying the cult of a specific deity in Epirus¹¹.

⁹ The *Nymphaion* at Apollonia and the sanctuary of Apollo Aktios should not be included among the Epirote shrines, because the first was in Illyria and the second was at Anaktorion (only later the festivals Aktia were moved to Nikopolis).

¹⁰ As for the political importance of the sanctuary of Asklepios in the Hellenistic and Roman period, see CABANES 1998 and MELFI 2012.

¹¹ In a couple of other works (TZOUVARA SOULI 1992; TZOUVARA SOULI 1993) she attempted to give synopses of Epirote cults to be compared with other regional religious systems, but the outcomes, even because of their briefness, are far from being exhaustive and far-reaching.

Tzouvara Souli's last book (TZOUVARA SOULI 2008), which is, for admission of the author herself, the expanded version of an article published in English in the proceedings of the 4th international congress of Grenoble on *l'Illyrie méridionale et l'Épire dans l'antiquité* under the title 'The cults of Zeus in ancient Epirus' (TZOUVARA SOULI 2004), continues this trend. The book (and formerly the article) begins *ex abrupto* with no introduction and outline of methodological approach followed. The intention is to present a survey of the places where Zeus was worshipped, without limiting the investigation to the territory of ancient Epirus (pp. 37-196). In spite of what the title suggests, the author included a few other regions in Northern Greece, Athens and the Greek colonies of Magna Graecia and Sicily. Tzouvara Souli starts listing the places where Zeus was worshipped from the most evident example, i.e. the oracular sanctuary of Zeus Naios at Dodona (pp. 35-140). She proceeds, then, to enumerate place after place, according to a principle of 'quantity' – from the site containing the most numerous instances testifying the cult of Zeus to that with the fewest evidence –, but without explaining what criteria she used in the identification of a cult. After Dodona, there are Passaron (pp. 140-147), Ambrakia (pp. 148-156), Cassope (pp. 157-165), Athamania (pp. 166-167), Gitana (pp. 168-171), Pandosia (pp. 171-172), Phoinike (pp. 173-175), Butrint (176-178), Apollonia (pp. 178-181), Epidamnos (pp. 181-182), Amantia (pp. 182-185), Byllis (pp. 185-187), Olympi (pp. 187-188), Photiki (pp. 188-192), Nikopolis (pp. 192-196). Outside Epirus, according to Tzouvara Souli, the cult of Zeus is attested in Akarnania (pp. 197-199), Leukas (pp. 200-203), Kerkyra (pp. 203-204), Macedonia (pp. 204-205), Athens (pp. 206-210), Magna Graecia and Sicily (pp. 210-215).

The general impression is that her work is a simple list of finds differently relating to the father of the gods. The lack of an introduction, in which the author should have explained the criteria and methodology used to conceive the book, is the first most evident fault. In addition,

no range of investigation is specified. By saying 'ancient Epirus' it is not clear what limits the author implies. Does Epirus denote a political or a geographical limit? A political unity of the Epirotes, if ever, occurred very late, since only in the late 4th century BC they were *symmachoi* (SGDI 1336; DAVIES 2000). Moreover, it is difficult to state what *ethne*, *poleis* and tribes agreed to the *symmachia* and to the succeeding political forms, as alliances and partnerships were particularly fluctuating there (MELFI - PICCININI 2012a; MELFI - PICCININI 2012b). As for the geographical limits, the issue is equally problematic as the Northern and Southern borders, according to ancient sources, often varied¹². However, whether generically speaking, one might consider the North and the South limits of Epirus respectively around the Ceraunian mountains and the Ambrakia Gulf (X. *Hell.* VI, 1, 7; EPHOR. *FGrHist* 70 F 129b; LYCURG. I, 26), Tzouvara Souli does not explain why she encompasses in Epirus at least two *poleis* of Illyria, i.e. Apollonia¹³ and Epidamnos, and Athamania, an *ethnos* normally considered in the region of Thessaly¹⁴.

As a further matter, no specificity of the chronological range investigated derives from the use of the adjective 'ancient' related to Epirus. No clarification comes from the examination of the data collected, which refer mainly to archaic, classical and Hellenistic periods, but a few instances also date to the Roman period (e.g. the inscription mentioning Zeus Naios, whose statue was probably dedicated to Asklepios in Akarnania) and to the Hadrian period (e.g. the inscriptions at Nikopolis).

A thorough plan seems to lack behind Tzouvara Souli's, at first glance, systematic survey.

Other more urgent issues concern Tzouvara Souli's treatment of basic questions as the identification of cults in Epirus – questions, unfortunately, already indicated over twenty years ago (SOURVINOU INWOOD 1986). In 1986 Sourvinou Inwood indeed pointed out that "the author [n.d.r. Tzouvara Souli]'s notion of what constitutes evidence leave much to be desired. For example, in what way can a bronze mirror

¹² For the overall discussion, see FUNKE - MOUSTAKIS - HOCHSCHULZ 2004, 338-339. The Eastern and Western borders are naturally given respectively by the Tomaros Mountains and by the Ionian and Adriatic Seas.

¹³ *Poleis*, such as Apollonia and Amphilocheia, were considered sometimes in, sometimes out. As for Amphilocheia, Strabo contradicts himself: in VII, 7, 1 it is in, in IX, 5, 1 it is out; STR. II, 5, 40 and XVI, 2, 43 considers Apollonia in, but ST.BYZ., s.v. 'Ἀπολλωνία' and 'Γυλάκεια', places it in Illyria.

¹⁴ According to PS.SCYMN. 614 Athamania bordered on Thessaly, and Strabo considered it as an Epirote *ethnos* (STR. VII, 7, 1). ST.BYZ., s.v. 'Ἀθαμανία' talks about a χώρα Ἰλλυρίας, but underlines that there were different opinions οἱ δὲ Θεσσαλίας; See DECOURT - NIELSEN - HELLY 2004, 690-691.

(of possibly Corinthian manufacture) with an anthropomorphic handle, which may perhaps represent Aphrodite, be considered evidence for an archaic/classical cult of Aphrodite in Apollonia?" (SOURVINO INWOOD 1986). Thus, paraphrasing today Sourvinou Inwood's remark, *mutatis mutandis*, in what way a statuette of Zeus with the thunderbolt, similar to those found in Dodona (p. 182), should be considered as a proof of a cult of Zeus Naios in Amantia, when no other (archaeological, literary and epigraphic) evidence of such a cult exists there? Likewise, can the find of a few statuettes of Zeus in Photiki (pp. 189-191), be considered as sufficient proof testifying the worship of Zeus in the area? Or rather, should not they be regarded as a treasuring of precious metals?

It is evident that questions like 'what find should be considered valid proof of a cult?', 'what does define a private and public cult?' should have been addressed before starting the treatment. The simple distinction between what is a cult and what is a sanctuary and, by the same token, between private and public cult would have helped in avoiding misinterpretations and ingenuities¹⁵. In spite of these evident limits, the book, as well as Tzouvara Souli's whole scientific production, represents a mine of first hand information. This terrific amount of archaeological and literary evidence is extremely useful as a synopsis of various attestations of Zeus in Epirus as well as a proof of the contacts between Epirus and Athens from the 5th century onwards.

From these two perspectives (i.e. the study of single or group of sanctuaries or a sole divine

figure), only a work on Epirote religion struck a discordant note and moved toward a more general inquiry: F. Quantin's article (QUANTIN 1999). The article is divided in three main sections, each of them exploring specific topics: the Hellenic character of Epirote life; its regional nuances and aspects; the life, the imaginary and religious feeling. Starting from the common ancient belief that Epirus was a distant, remote and barbarian region, Quantin outlined the main characteristics of Epirote religious life by focusing on its idiosyncratic and chthonian features. He analysed its pantheon, the morphological features of its sanctuaries, the cult practices and officials. He aimed at distinguishing what was imported in Epirus after the contacts with the Greeks of the colonies and what was inherently local. One might wonder, however, whether a strict distinction between what was Greek from what was Epirote and/or barbarian – a rather difficult task, even in ancient times – is feasible in Epirus: ancient authors disagree in defining the territory and its people as Greek or non-Greek¹⁶.

Another aspect investigated by Quantin was also the reflection of Epirote socio-economic life in Epirus on religious phenomena (e.g. cults, attributes, practices, etc.); in this sense, for example, it is paradigmatic the large diffusion of the cult of Herakles, traditionally connected with pastoralism, in a region, Epirus, where transhumance is at the base of the economy.

Although Quantin's analysis is broad ranging and in-depth, it does not leave space to a systematic exam of all the evidence gathered. Thus, a comprehensive study able to identify

¹⁵ When trying to identify a public divine worship in an ancient culture, the first question a scholar should ask himself/herself is 'how do we detect a sanctuary?' The answer is not by all means obvious. Certainly, the exam of written evidence testifying a cult place, the ancient remains of cult practice, such as temples and votives, and iconographic sources attesting deities, mythical events, cult practices are fundamental. However, in the lack of written sources (accounts or epigraphic texts), the markers useful to detect a sacred space and/or a cult are given by material objects and iconographic evidence. In regions where no full exploration has been done and no abundant literary and epigraphic evidence exists, the systematic identification of sanctuaries is a rather difficult task. In these latter cases, the study of the material culture is the only guidance to spot cult places, thus it is important to look at the whole context, using qualitative, quantitative and comparative analysis. The first attempt to establish a grid of patterns helpful in the recognition of a sacred place was carried out by Renfrew (RENFREW 1985, 11-26 and RENFREW 1994, followed by PRENT 2005, 12-26). Although his methodology was used in the study of the sanctuary of Phylakopi, the value of this scientific model should not be restricted to prehistoric periods. According to Renfrew, although the context is at the basis of the recognition of a cult place, a certain caution should lead the interpretation. For example, in the analysis of the material evidence, "when iconic representations can be found, the possibilities of play and of simple decoration should be explored (RENFREW 1985, 21)". Renfrew also underlines that it is "important to recognise, where they exist, portrayals of deities or of spirits who are themselves the objects of worship to seek to distinguish them from the other figurations which occurs in sanctuary contexts, particularly from votive offerings". Thus, although found in the same sacred context, one thing is the cult statue another is a simple votive offering representing a deity.

¹⁶ Ancient sources do not consider unanimously the Epirotes as Greek: HDT. II, 52, 2; TH. II, 68, 9; II, 80, 3-5; II, 81, 4-8. On modern scholarship, dealing with the topic, see CABANES 1979, 183-199; HATZPOULOS 1997, 140-145; MALKIN, 2001, 187-212; MARI 2011, 535-558.

the general character of Epirote religion through the exam of all the public cults has remained so far unrealised.

A better knowledge of the history of the sanctuaries is a way to ascertain the life and development of North-western *poleis* and *ethne* and the processes of formation of Greek civilization in the classical period, as already reckoned a few years ago (HATZOPOULOS - MARI 2004, 512). Religion and cult practice is one area of study, which potentially would provide particularly interesting novelties, especially in reason of the new fieldwork and archaeological surveys carried out in Epirus. Even though they have contributed hugely in creating a much sharper and detailed picture of ancient Epirus and its neighbours, much is still to do¹⁷. A cursory survey of the works of the international archaeological missions nowadays engaged in the Albanian and Greek territories with the support of local authorities highlights indeed the abundance of new data brought to light and the urgency to re-examine the old ones, according to modern technologies and from interdisciplinary standpoints¹⁸.

In this perspective it is important to consider new approaches in the study of shrines and religion (notably MORGAN 1990; GRAF 1985; PARKER 2005; TAITA 2008), demanding that we turn from attempting to understand *how* a single shrine or cult worked so as to concentrate on their regional context. Such a change of direction is a fundamental step in the creation of the first systematic inventory of public cult places in Epirus from a more exhaustive and pragmatic

perspective. In approaching this challenging research it is paramount to bring into practice a viable methodology, which would work, in general, for any study of regional Greek cults, so to point and overpass the limits which current works sometimes share (first of all, by defining the geographical and chronological limits of the investigation). This means, firstly, to pool all literary, archaeological and epigraphic sources testifying to religious and cult activity in the region, secondly to distinguish private and public cults (in order to have the first record of Epirote sanctuaries), and finally to compare and study the data synchronically and diachronically within the frame of the socio-political development of Epirus. To appraise fully the diachronic and synchronic development of Epirote religion, especially in relation to other, often inter-related, phenomena occurring in the area, as socio-political changes during the Romanization of Epirus, and in the attempt to spot possible chthonian cults, it is important to define the range of investigation. Questions like ‘what cults were introduced and what cults survived?’ need inevitably to be approached and put in their geographical and historical frame of reference.

Such a prospect, which might be a forerunner for future research in the field, will offer an inventory of cults and sanctuaries as well as the base to afford a comprehensive analysis of the religious life in Epirus, in connection with the political and economic transformations of the region.

Jessica Piccinini

jessica.piccinini@univie.ac.at

¹⁷ Sir J. Boardman (BOARDMAN 1974, 233-234) first understood the issue, affirming “excavations in what are now Albania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria have told us much about the northern neighbours of the Greeks in the Iron Age and supplemented the scant and often imaginative testimony of ancient writers. But there is still much to be understood and although the character of the civilization of these peoples is at times quite clear, its relationship to that of Greece itself, even in the simple matter of time, is not always so straightforward”. Despite the forty years gap from Boardman’s statement and an increasing number of archaeological excavations nowadays in Southern Albania and Northern Greece, our knowledge of the history of the region, in its political, social and economical development, is far from being complete. The few comprehensive studies on Epirus, such as those by FRANKE 1955, LEPORE 1962, HAMMOND 1967, LARSEN 1968 and CABANES 1976 need to be updated in the light of recent and in-progress investigations, especially those in Albanian territory after the fall in 1991 of the communist regime, which had stopped foreign archaeological excavations for decades (GALATY - WATKINSON 2004, 8-12; GILKES 2004).

¹⁸ The archaeological missions engaged in recent years in the territories of modern Albania and Greece are several: the Butrint Foundation at Butrint, the University of Chieti Pescara at Durres, the University of Bologna at Phoinike, the French missions at Byllis, the University of Macerata at Hadrianopolis, the Finnish surveys in Thesprotia, the University of Ioannina at Antigoneia and Dodona, etc.

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