The W.H. Allen Memorial Lecture, October 23, 2019

During the fourth century BCE, hundreds of tablets were deposited at the Oracle of Dodona in Northern Greece recording the questions asked by people from all walks of life: embassies from the famously civil war-plagued Corcyra; individuals asking about their job, children, or marriage; and even the most marginalized group, enslaved men and women, asking about their future prospects for freedom. In the 2019 Allen Memorial Lecture, I discussed my current work on the tablets documenting the questions asked by slaves, focusing in particular on the terminology of slavery in these texts.1

Dodona was not the only oracular site in the ancient world: Delphi, for example, was perhaps the most famous site, and indeed Herodotus gives a story about how Delphi earned her fame, being proven the most accurate when tested by Croesus, king of Lydia (1.46–48). But Dodona was an ancient and prestigious site—it is mentioned in Homer (Iliad 16.233-5)—and was visited by local residents as well as overseas travelers for centuries. As at other sites, questioners came to seek advice from the oracle—at Delphi, from the oracle of Apollo, and at Dodona, from the oracle of Zeus and Dione.

How did the god respond to these inquiries? Any reader of Herodotus will be familiar with the enigmatic responses in verse that Delphi was known to provide. For example, the Athenians inquired at Delphi about the Persian invasion, and received a foreboding and cryptic response, alluding to the “wooden walls” as their only safety. What was meant by the “wooden walls” was debated at Athens; the eventual solution was that their ships would save them (7.140–143). The

This description is anachronistic on several points, but makes the mechanics clear enough. A simple variant on this would have the questions phrased not as ‘yes/no’ questions, but as “to which god or hero should I make a sacrifice?”, e.g., “if I wish to succeed in my music career, to which god or hero should I make a sacrifice?”, with the response options including the range

1 For items on display in the Museum of Ioannina or the exhibit at the Akropolis Museum (AM Dodona), I have used their translations except where marked. All other translations, except where noted, are my own.

2 Johnston (2008), 63–8.

3 Johnston (2008), 52.

Of course, the questions were also not written on paper slips, but rather on lead tablets. And this is part of what makes this oracle of such great interest, because those tablets—hundreds of them—survive (see Figure 1). And thus we can see what questions brought pilgrims to this oracle. Their questions seem to have been written by the individuals asking the questions, or their personal scribes, and they cover a wide range of topics. Against the norm of Greek historical sources overrepresenting elite, male, Athenian perspectives, these writers came from a wide range of backgrounds—as we shall see, there is even evidence of the questions enslaved people asked at the oracle.

But indeed the greatest warning given to the Spartans was that, when they consulted Zeus of Dodona to ask about victory, and the ambassadors had properly set up the jar in which the lots were held, a pet monkey belonging to the king of the Molossi overturned the lots and everything else that had been prepared for the process, scattering them this way and that. Then the priestess who was in charge of the oracle is said to have told the Spartans that they should focus on staying safe rather than on winning victories.

(Cicero, De Divinatione, 1.76)
To begin, though, as a comparison with, for example, the question about the safety of Athenians during the Persian War, it’s worth noting that embassies visited this oracle to inquire about what we might consider political questions. One well-known tablet reads as follows:

God. The Kerkyraians (Corfiots) and the inhabitants of Oricum ask Zeus Naios and Dione which god or hero they should sacrifice to and invoke so that they can rule their land in the best and safest possible way and have a rich and good crop.

(Museum of Ioannina, Inv. No. 9)

Trouble in Corcyrta is not unheard of in other historical sources. Thucydides famously documented the civil war in Corcyrta in his account of the Peloponnesian War. This embassy of Corcyreans, perhaps at their wit’s end, has sought help from the oracle, and in fact more than one tablet asks about domestic affairs in Corcyrta.

An additional feature to point out on this tablet is that here the question is asked to Zeus Naios and Dione. The epithet Naios (“the dweller”) is commonly used here for Zeus, and his consort here is Dione.

Although we do have some political or civic questions like this in the corpus of inscriptions from Dodona, a huge number concern personal matters. For example, one asks about a marriage: “Should I give my daughter Thorakis to Thearides?” (Museum of Ioannina, Inv. No. 21). Another questioner brings up his career, and puts his question this way: “God, good luck. Does the god reply to Phaiikylos that he should practice his ancestral techne, fishing, and do better?” (Museum of Ioannina, Inv. No. 6, my translation). I examined the tablets concerning individuals’ professions in an article published a few years ago.7

In the rest of the present work, I wish to turn to a handful of the inquiries made by enslaved men and women at the oracle. Until 2013, the number of tablets published was quite small; in that year, the publication of Dakaris, Vokotopoulou, Christidis (2013) made many more of these tablets available. Work is ongoing to translate these into languages other than Greek, and to examine them for the sorts of questions about social history that they might shed light on.

First, a bit of general background on slavery in ancient Greece. There were a wide variety of types of slavery practiced in ancient Greece, from helotage in Lakedaimonia to chattel slavery in Athens. Some readers may find it surprising that enslaved men and women managed to make it to this oracle. But enslaved men and women were not solely employed on domestic or agricultural labor, but across a range of professions. Thus, travelling with or without their master may well have been part of their normal course of duties.8 Enslaved people might be Greek or non-Greek. Manumission was a possibility in many cases, and was not simply a matter of a slave being freed and becoming a full citizen devoid of obligations to their former master (on the contrary, the term paramone covers a sort of manumission where the former slave was obligated to still serve his or her former master).9

It is worth keeping in mind that a huge range of the questions asked at the oracle could, in theory, have been asked by an enslaved person: for example, questions about children, work, or travel could plausibly be asked by enslaved individuals. It would be difficult, however, to ascertain that the questioner was an enslaved person in these cases.

We might ourselves bring a range of questions to these texts: what is the ethnic origin of enslaved men and women, and which poleis do they reside in? Were these slaves themselves literate? What is the nature of the slave trade in this period? What jobs were pursued by these slaves? How did the manumission processes work? And, is there a systematic terminology of slavery in operation?

7 Hulme Kozey (2018).
8 See further Eidinow (2011), 247–52 and 266.
9 See further Eidinow (2011), 262.
An interesting and well-known example of one of the tablets relating to slavery runs as follows: “Razia, Teitykous’ slave, is asking the god and Tyche (Fortune) if she will be fully set free before her master’s death” (AM Dodona 122). This question provides an introduction to the striking nature of this source: it is immediate and direct. This one is also notable because we have the names of the enslaved woman and her master; some have suggested his name is Illyrian. Finally, the phrase translated as “fully set free” picks up on questions about the manumission process: as Eidinow points out, this may indicate that “she had already been manumitted and was looking for an end to her obligations when she consulted the oracle” or that she was looking for an agreement to live apart from him (while still, in fact, enslaved—in which case this would be translated quite differently as not “will be fully set free” but “will be allowed to live apart”).

Finally, I’ll conclude by comparing two terms for “slave” used in these texts. First, we have DVC 1489B: “the human [asks] about their freedom,” with the word anthropos indicating the enslaved speaker. The second is asked by a master: “[should he] purchase new slaves?”, with the term andrapoda being translated as slaves (DVC 853B). The first of these terms, in other contexts, simply means human, unmarked by gender. It is, however, a common word for slave, alongside other common terms, such as doulos and pais. Andrapodon, on the other hand, is a notably pejorative term which usually gets used for war-captives. As Yvon Garlan has pointed out, it is a word that is strikingly dehumanizing in its etymology: it is formed by analogy with tetrapodon, like tetrapod, literally a four-footed thing, idiomatically, livestock. So andrapodon is human as property, human as livestock.

In examining these texts, here’s an interesting generalization I have seen thus far: the subject of a question, as in this first one, never refers to himself or herself as an andrapodon or pais, or for that matter any of the terms I just listed other than anthropos. The examples we’ve just looked at all used their name instead, and then this one (and others that I’ve examined) use anthropos. So perhaps this is less pejorative than the rest, which would make sense, against terms like andrapodon (human as livestock) or pais (adult slave as child, a dig at their ability to run their own lives and often an implicit claim about them being intellectually inferior to the free men around them). But it is not necessarily a totally happy term either. One of the most famous accounts of slavery is that of Orlando Patterson, who coined the notion of slavery as social death—in other words, he identified the particular wrong of slavery as being reducible to the fact, not that slaves have their labor exploited, but that they are completely cut off from normal society, via regulations and restrictions for example on their ability to move where they wish, participate in religious life, marry who they like, and even stay in contact with their own children. Anthropos, as a term, in a way can ironically look dehumanizing; by emphasizing a slave as a mere human, not a father or son, not a butcher, baker or candlestick maker, not even a man or a woman.

I would like to conclude by reflecting on how thinking about anthropos as a word for slave in these tablets can then impact how we look at literary and philosophical texts. We will look at just one example. This is a bit from one of Epictetus’ discourses—Epictetus being a Stoic philosopher from the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. He was born into slavery himself, and sold to Nero’s secretary Epaphroditus; he was eventually freed after spending a childhood and young adulthood as a slave.

Epictetus, via his time at Nero’s court and afterwards working with students from

---

10 Eidinow (2007), 131, n. 23.
13 Patterson 1982.
elite classes, had a keen sense of different anxieties across various social classes in his time period. A distinct formal characteristic of his writing is that he invokes his reader or audience, a stand-in for his students, as *anthropos* very frequently. Here is a sentence from the first book of *Discourses*: “Consider just this: at what price you are selling your power of choice. Human (*anthropos*), if nothing else, don’t you sell it on the cheap. (1.2.33)”

Arguably, his word looks to be *anthropos* in the same sense as in some of the tablets from Dodona—human as slave. The evidence for this is that a number of similar passages in Epictetus use the word *andrapodon*, seemingly as a synonym. In some cases, Epictetus will invoke his reader as *anthropos* and then *andrapodon*. So, the suggestion is that he is using the word *anthropos* here not to mean man, but slave.

Understanding Epictetus’ philosophy can help us refine this even further. A major theme of the *Discourses* is the idea that the rich young men he is teaching might think they are far from slavery, but they aren’t. He paints these vivid portraits of men at court who are near the top of the social pyramid, but panic-stricken every day — why didn’t Nero invite me to dinner? Have I fallen out of his favor? Whom might he prefer now? And so on. He construes this as a form of slavery—a construal that gains some credence through Epictetus’ own experience as a slave.

The suggestion then is that for Epictetus, the fact *anthropos* could mean slave is a tool to knock his wealthy and privileged students down a peg. They might think they are insulated from the horror of slavery because of their status. Epictetus thinks they are emphatically wrong—for him, not only is every slave also a human, but every human is a potential slave, because (in his view) an important form of slavery is both pervasive and self-imposed.

Since my work on this topic is ongoing, I will close with just this thought: the thing that has shocked me the most when working on these texts, both when I was focusing on craftsmen and then turning to slaves, is that I always assume the remains will be so meagre that it will be impossible to draw anything out of them. In both cases, sheer numbers have pointed a different way—for slaves, right now, I am working on several dozen texts, not the five or six I initially thought I would find. This is a goldmine for all of us interested in understanding ancient Greek society, and one whose full potential is only beginning to be seen.

---

**Bibliography**


